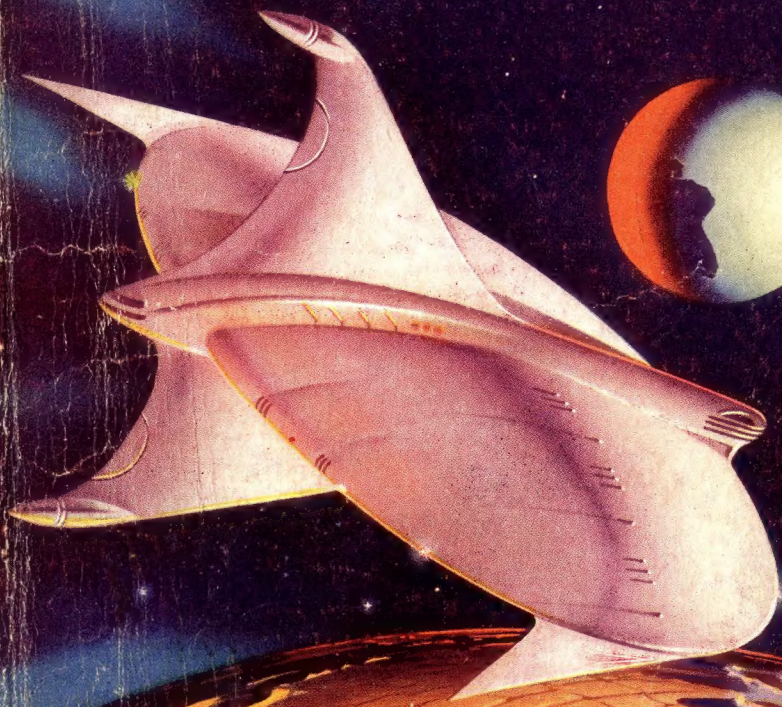


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# EXILE FROM JUPITER

BY

BRUNO G. CONDRAY

*Author of*

"ODYSSEY IN SPACE", "THE OUTER BEYOND".

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## CHAPTER I

THE war with the Martians had been successfully concluded when Astorola first came into Brad Thursbys' office. A month beforehand the armed forces of Earth had marched through London's thronged streets in triumph. Now that the flag-waving and trumpet-blaring had died down, responsible persons on Earth were considering the best way to colonize the conquered planet. The invading Martians had been totally annihilated by specific order, the risk of allowing prisoners to return being too great. The Army of Occupation had express orders that on no account were any Martians to be allowed to leave their own planet.

All these thoughts rampaged through Brad's mind as he gazed at the beautiful, but badly dressed girl in front of him. He wondered if she could be a Martian who had escaped the meshes of civil and service security. She admitted to having no home, no parents, no knowledge of the past. The only thing Brad knew was that she had powers beyond the capabilities of an ordinary Earth person. Perhaps he should have communicated his suspicions to the authorities, but he was a theatrical agent and Astorola was a sensation.

At first he had tried to get rid of her. As soon as he saw her act, however, he knew that he was on to something good. There was a boom in the live theatre such as had not been known since the middle of the twentieth century. After fifty years of televisonics, dimenascopes, psychoscopes and febroscopes, the pendulum had swayed from the scientific type of entertainment to the desire to see real live performers in flesh and blood on the

theatre boards again.

Astorola's act would bring any house down. But if she was a Martian there was no future in it. She would be hounded down and he'd finish up on a Lunar derangement camp for complicity.

"Look here!" he rasped. The question which might throw a fortune away stuck in his throat.

Her dark eyes wavered. "Yes," she said. Her voice was soft and sweet, tinged with an almost Continental accent.

"You're not a refugee from Mars, are you?" he snapped.

She shook her head.

He caught hold of her roughly. "Are you sure?"

The fear he had expected to flash into her face didn't materialise. She merely looked bewildered.

"Are you sure?" he repeated. His rugged face was twisted with anxiety, his deep blue eyes blazed.

"No, I not come from Mars," she said, without flinching.

"All right, you win," he said, with a heavy sigh. "As long as you're not from the red planet I don't care where you came from." He relaxed back in his chair, lit a cigar and put his feet on the desk top. "Now, go through the levitation act again."

Her laughter tinkled like a bell. A lock of sleek black hair curled across her brow. Then she started to rise.

Brad gaped at her incredulously. He had seen many a board-thumper float about the stage suspended by artfully concealed wires. But not one had ever gone twice round his office floating three feet above the piebald carpet. "It's amazing," he gasped, jaw still sagging.

"I don't care if you did come over with the backwash from Europe," he continued. "The world is at peace and the International Vigilant Brigade is going to keep it that way. They'll man the space stations and be able to wipe out whole nations at a time, if necessary. Think what that means! The people are intoxicated by it."

She stood beside him, smiling happily.

He stood up, bent towards her, then gasped out and snatched at her hands.

"There are no rings on your fingers," he murmured. His brow furrowed. "You don't do it by any means of hidden power, do you?"

Astorola gaped at him in puzzled silence.

"No miniature compressed air jets, no atomic thrust devices?" He dropped her hands and ran his fingers down her clothes. "Nothing concealed," he said. "For a minute I thought it might be something mechanical; that would certainly be detected. Now, let me see the vase stunt again."

She nodded and her black curls bobbed. He released his collar as her gaze flashed to the desk top. The glittering nickel-ode vase of purple orcadias began to rise, wavered, disintegrated

in mid-air, fell and landed on the desk intact, as if it had never been moved.

"There!" she said. Her face was flushed and smiling.

Brad wiped the sweat from his brow. Thick wads of World Federation Bank notes were drifting before his eyes. Astorola was the brightest prospect since the lunar gold rush.

"Now you get a gyro-taxi home, my dear," said Brad, in the syrupy voice he reserved for top-of-the-bill acts. "Leave your address with my secretary and don't perform any more tricks until you hear from me."

"Tricks?" she queried.

His head shook with incredulity. "You know, walking on air and raising vases."

Her delightful red lips curved into a smile. Then she said, "I haven't got a home."

Brad's jaw dropped. Of course, she had told him, but suspicion rose up again within him, tight and malignant, stretching at his skin. "Why not?" he snapped. His eyes blazed like twin beams from an Army ray-blaster. "Where did you stay last night?"

"I was travelling." She stared back at him, cool and unruffled.

He plucked at his wrinkled brow. "Well, if that's true you couldn't have come from Mars," he murmured, almost inaudibly. His eyes continued to bore into her. She faced up to him with too much confidence to be lying, he decided. But a rasp of authority hardened his voice as he demanded, "Where did you come from?"

"I don't remember. They gave me drugs."

That was possible, he thought. Human driftwood was not unusual in this modern age. Science worked hand in hand with politics, the scientists providing the politicians with an ever-increasing range of drugs for subjugating the human brain. "Now listen, Astorola," he said sharply. "You must have come from somewhere. Surely you've got some remembrance of what happened before you were drugged?"

Without taking her eyes from him she said, "I am here. You want me to work for you, yes?"

He sensed that this was an ultimatum. If she didn't come from Mars he had nothing to lose. She was too good a thing to let slip through his fingers. "You're right," he said. "We're going to make a great partnership." He shrugged his broad shoulders and grinned. "You don't know where you came from but that doesn't matter. The problem is where are we going to fix you up?"

"I come with you," she said.

Brad swallowed hard. At thirty-two he was proud of being a bachelor. He wanted to stay that way. "You can't come with me," he said. "We'd have to get married."

Her laugh tinkled pleasantly. "Married?" she repeated. "What is that?"

"You don't know?"

She wagged her head.

He grabbed her by the arms. "Then you're no Earth person," he rapped out. "Nobody on Earth could fail to know about marriage. There's been enough controversy raging over inter-planetary marriages."

She realised that she had been trapped. Her lips gaped partly open and momentarily her eyes flashed feral black.

"All right, out with it," he snapped. "I can't see how you could have escaped the security police if you're a Martian. No Venusians have left their planet for the past twenty years. And if you were born of convicts on the Moon you wouldn't have been allowed to come to Earth. Now, Astorola, where did you come from?"

Her lips pouted defiantly. Her eyes remained black and stubborn as she stared back at him.

"It's no use lying any longer," he warned her. "If you don't give me a satisfactory explanation I'll have to put you in the hands of the security police. They've got ways of making people talk."

Danger still lurked in her eyes, made him squirm in his seat.

But he realised that for his own safety he had to know the truth. He softened a little as he said, "You'll find me a sympathetic listener. I don't want to hand you to the security boys, you're too valuable to me."

Long eye lashes flickered across her eyes in the flux of tears. Suddenly she jumped up and ripped the ill-fitting dress from her body.

Brad made as if to object, but the words died in his throat. His hands flayed the air hopelessly, then dropped limp into his lap. His eyes protruded as he stared at her. She was dressed in a one-piece garment which at first sight looked as if it were made of fish scales pieced together. It fitted skin-tight to her figure. Her legs and arms were bare, evenly sun-tanned; her eyes were afire, her hair lustrous and bathed in a soft blue glow which seemed to emanate from her dress.

Brad's mouth fell open. He had never seen anybody quite so beautiful in his whole life. She moved forward, the aureola of phosphorescent blue moving with her, clinging round her like a drape of the flimsiest satin. "Astorola!" he gasped.

A brush of smile flickered across her lips, but her eyes remained fixed on him, strangely compelling, almost hypnotic. "I come from the planet Jupiter," she said, in a voice which tingled with sensation.

He felt the effect of her words rise in icy thrills at the back of his neck and run through his body. "Jupiter!" he repeated. His voice was flat to his own ears. "But . . . but man has not yet reached Jupiter!"

"But a Jupitan woman has reached Earth," she said. There

was nothing menacing in her voice, merely a smug confidence.

Brad continued to gape. "How? Why?" he gasped. He was too stunned to think or speak coherently.

"There's no cause for alarm," she said. "I have no weapons or equipment with me. I am quite defenceless."

"But—but with ordinary clothes on you look little different from an Earth woman." He was still boggling at her as he spoke. "Your skin is perhaps whiter, your hair blacker than the average; a little unreal, in fact, almost like the sheen of a bird's feathers. Your eyes, too, are larger, deeper, more expressive. Why did you leave Jupiter?"

"I hate it," snapped Astorola, with vehemence. "They deprived me of all my rights of citizenship and banished me to Earth."

"But how did they send you to Earth?" he asked anxiously. "I've heard no reports of strange craft being spotted. There's no alarm out for suspected aliens. Surely you couldn't have got a craft to land on Earth without being spotted by radar, visonomic machines or seisonomic equipment?"

The smug smile returned to her face. "I know nothing of what you speak about," she said. "But on Jupiter we are far more advanced than you on Earth."

Brad whistled and glanced at a storeroom adjoining his office. "There's a prop box in there full of odds and ends of clothes. Go in and cover yourself up with something, for heaven's sake. If my secretary sees you like that we're finished."

He opened the storeroom door for her, then rushed to the phone. The Central Observation Bureau assured him that no unidentified space-craft had landed in Britain since the end of the Martian war. He rang up the International Vigilant Brigade headquarters, they confirmed what he had been told. The Bureau of Space Exploration knew of no expeditions to Jupiter.

Astorola came out dressed in a purple dress tied by a red sash.

"Sit down and listen," said Brad. "I've been checking up. As far as I can make out no alien craft has been seen landing on or approaching Earth. But you say you're from Jupiter. Before I decide what to do, you've got to tell me how you got here."

"I came in the prototype burolovane—our latest design in space-ships, specially adapted for landing on Earth."

"Why wasn't it detected?" Brad flashed.

"That's simple." She looked and sounded disturbingly superior. "Our craft was fitted with dakar circuits, a hyper-magnetic force which would render most of your modern detectors ineffective."

"Then where did you land? The craft must have been seen on the ground?"

"We chose the right meteorological conditions. I was ejected from the craft when it touched down, then the burolovane burrowed into the earth. The vane at the bottom of the construction did the burrowing while the one at the top replaced the soil above it. The burolovane was then completely hidden. When

it took off the vanes acted in reverse, the fallow field hardly looked as if it had been touched."

Brad sat silent for a long time, just staring, his mind too small to cope with the immensity of the problem.

Astorola stood up and walked to his desk. "Well, what are you going to do?" she asked.

He secured both her hands in a fierce grip. "You were sent here to spy," he ground out.

"No—no!" she protested.

His mind raced through a thousand disturbing possibilities. At last he said, "There's only one way you can escape detection. We'll have to get married. That will allay initial suspicion. You came over from Europe, you understand that?"

Gratitude brought an enhancing softness to her alabaster white face. "Thank you," she said. "You won't be sorry."

He tightened his grip on her until she winced. "When you become my wife, you become an Earth citizen, you realise that? Your loyalty to Earth is irrevocably pledged. You no longer belong to Jupiter whatever happens. Will you stand by that pledge?"

"I will," she murmured.

The utter sincerity of her tone made him relax his grip. But Brad Thursby was not happy.

## CHAPTER II

**A**FTER the marriage ceremony Brad established his bride in his London flat. It took him one month to arrange a suitable publicity campaign prior to her first public appearance. Nobody suspected that she was not an Earth woman, but as the time drew near for her stage debut, Brad began to wonder if he was doing the right thing. She was bound to be a sensation. People would do their utmost to discover how she went through her amazing routine.

He was in a state of trembling nervous fever as he stood in the wings of a small Birmingham theatre on the opening night. On the other side of the footlights was a large audience. They were going to get the shock of their lives. But what would be the repercussions?

Astorola came up to him noiselessly from behind. He nearly jumped out of his skin when she laid a white hand on his shoulder. His face was stretched with anguish as he spun round. She was cool and smiling, a confident radiance shining from her dark eyes.

"I go on next?" she asked.

His head flopped like a rag doll. He tried to speak, but his mouth was parched with sensation. She looked stunning in a full length black gown fitting elegantly to her figure. A large

diamond clasp sparkled on her left shoulder, reflecting the lights of the stage. He wanted to grab her, run her out of the theatre, make sure that she was not seen in public. Foreboding swept over him with the force of a tidal wave, froze his blood and gripped at his stomach. But his eyes remained hypnotically fixed on the flashing diamonds, the whiteness of her throat.

"They nearly finished?" she said, nudging him.

His mind had been leaping across space to Jupiter, running underground to the Lunar penal catacombs. But he now felt the stage boards beneath him. He glanced at the act in progress—old-time slapstick comedy. Jerry builders flopping paste about and going over each other with wall spray. The audience were crazy with glee. They had never seen anything so primitively funny.

The orchestra gently warmed up to the cymbal-clashing finale of the slapstick. Backstage there was a furious cleaning up of the mess. Out in front of the curtain the compere was giving Astorola her introductory build-up. Wings of panic fluttered in Brad's stomach until he felt he would be sick. Then suddenly the suspense was over. It was too late to withdraw. Astorola was on.

She was greeted with whoops of appreciation and shrill whistles. The audience were in hilarious mood. In her soft, pleasing voice she explained what she was going to do. The response was mocking and noisy. As the vase of flowers began to rise from her small black table somebody shouted, "Be careful the thread doesn't break!"

The wag's reward was shrieks of merriment from the gallery. Then the vase disintegrated and came together again. Eyes popped; there was an uncanny silence, followed by tumults of applause. Astorola stood in the centre of the stage, smiling vaguely, quite at ease. She attracted an ever-flow stylo from the pocket of a man in the stalls. Gasps sounded all round as the people watched it float through the air to come to rest in Astorola's outstretched hand. She repeated the trick with half a dozen different metal objects.

"It's some magnetic force," a young man shouted, standing up, flushed with his audacity. "Take this paper out of my hand."

He waved a newspaper in the air, but it quickly flew from his grasp. The young man stuck his hand to his mouth, sucking it and shaking it as if he were in pain. But nobody was watching. All eyes were on the paper. It rose high in the air, then burst into flames. There was a scuffle in the orchestra stall seats as they tried to dodge the cascade of charred, smouldering and flaming pieces.

When the disturbance subsided and all eyes were once again centred on the stage, Astorola was floating six feet off the ground, drawing things up from the table beneath her. Brad gazed out at the incredulous audience. They looked like a clinging mass of frogspawn—white faces, bald heads and popping dark eyes.

Eyes that followed Astorola's every movement, as if she had every pair under her personal control. The silence was uncanny. But shrieks pierced out as she left the stage and began swooping and diving over the audience with the ease of an over-sized bat. She finally came back to rest behind her table, still smiling in her modest manner. A stunned silence hung over the theatre when the curtain fell, then the tumult of applause broke out.

Astorola was called back half a dozen times. Having got over the initial shock, the public wanted more. Brad rubbed his hands with pleasure, all thought of danger having fled from his mind as he visualised Astorola's money-making potentiality. He pushed her back on the stage time and time again. The management were also full of glee, they too realising that they had booked a money-spinner. Only the acts that followed had any reason to complain. And they had plenty to moan about, for nobody listened to them. Astorola! Astorola! Astorola! It was the name on everybody's lips, she was the subject of every conversation. The popular top-of-the-bill dimenascopie star might well have been singing to herself for all the attention paid to her.

The following night it was the same. In fairness to the other acts Astorola was put on last. She caused another furore of wondrous excitement. Brad now saw that after he had completed the one week provincial engagement he was in the money. Even the Birmingham management had agreed to raise Astorola's salary ten-fold for another week's engagement. But on the third night there were a dozen London producers in the audience. Big money began to talk.

Astorola returned to London to become the talk of the town. Investigation panels were set up, critics expounded many different theories as to what were the secrets of the act, others popped up with weird and wonderful ideas. Astorola disproved them all and no real explanation was resolved.

Brad began flying high, wide and handsome. He bought a big house in Sussex. They came to the theatre in a chauffeur driven 170 m.p.h. atomic car. There were so many offers for the act that he didn't know which way to turn. Then Carlos was introduced to them in the theatre one evening. It made a lot of difference to Brad's sense of security. All the original haunting fears returned.

The theatre management had capitalised human curiosity by offering £500 reward to anybody who could discover any trickery in the act. This certainly helped pack the customers in, not that any publicity stunts were needed. Astorola was the most sought after woman in Britain. But the reward attracted amateur investigators. They were a nuisance, not any real danger. Jase Farbitt, however, was a different proposition. He was the head of the official investigators—a physicist, short, thin, with protruding teeth. He had a face like a ferret and a mind like one. He suspected something. Brad was sure of that. Farbitt had a

habit of popping up at the wrong moment, snooping, always on the lookout.

In this way, he appeared with Carlos. "I want you to meet a friend of mine," he said.

Brad and Astorola were leaving the theatre. They stopped. Brad was immediately apprehensive. He looked at Carlos. He was a tall, snake-hipped, wispy-moustached individual, whose sleek black hair and lightness on his feet stamped him as a gigolo.

"I'm interested in your act," said Carlos, smiling and addressing himself to Astorola.

Brad didn't like his attitude. "That doesn't make you one in a million," he snapped.

"But I've got a special interest," flashed Carlos. "I'm also a professional magician."

Astorola giggled.

"You've put a lot of us out of business, lady." He smiled. "But we can't expect much else when you introduce such a sensation. It's got us all baffled. I warn you, like Farbitt here, I intend to find out how you do it."

Brad squirmed. Farbitt was peering intently at Astorola. His face was expressionless. It gave Brad the creeps. "You're welcome," he said, with a dry laugh. He strode off quickly, dragging Astorola with him.

They had to attend a supper given in Astorola's honour. Brad received another jolt when they were introduced to Professor Arnold Henlow, the inter-planetary expert.

"I'm most charmed to meet such a celebrated lady," said the professor, with genuine warmth. "You're a lucky man to have such a wife, Thursby."

Brad gulped, his mouth slightly open. Uncomfortable prickles were slipping round the back of his neck and shivering downward.

Henlow was a world-renowned scientist and space explorer. He had set up the first space station and been the chief architect of the base on the Moon. The Venusian problem was settled amicably largely due to Henlow's influence. Many said that the Martian situation would never have developed into war if he had been in charge. As head of the International Vigilant Brigade he now held the peace of the world in his control. But Brad's fear did not arouse out of these considerations. Henlow was probably the most eminent authority on space conditions and the inhabitants of other planets. His keen scrutiny might detect Astorola's origin.

Brad wanted to get away, but Astorola was quite taken with Henlow. "Come, my dear," he said to her. "You must tell me about your act. I haven't seen it yet, but I'm told that it holds more mysteries than the outer space."

Cracks like that were enough to send Brad's legs to jelly, but he knew there was no escape. Henlow, tall, grey-haired, erect, smiling, a perfect gentleman, had hold of Astorola's arm.

They were soon conversing freely and intelligently, laughing together, obviously with a lot in common. Brad was left to his morbid thoughts, hoping and praying that Astorola wouldn't say too much.

During the next few days Carlos was a frequent visitor to the theatre. Brad had checked up on him and the findings were not much to his liking. Carlos was a shady character who had learned his sleight-of-hand magic knocking about spacemen's hostels, fleecing them of their earnings by trickery. Having been hounded out of and blacklisted from most of the large space-ports he had become a third-rate conjurer operating the lower type of variety halls. He had a reputation for making trouble wherever he went. Unfortunately, Astorola didn't seem bothered by his ubiquitous presence. In fact, it amused her to see him so interested in her act.

"I love to see the blank expression on his face when I go through my routine," she told Brad.

"That's all very well," he argued. "But he's up to no good and he's dangerous. If he gets on to something he won't let go."

Things came to a head one evening when Astorola went home and Brad stayed behind to talk business with the theatre management. He came out of the office feeling very pleased with himself. He walked hurriedly to a gyro-taxi hangar, was swept up in a lift, where he boarded a craft to take him back to Sussex.

High in the star-illuminated indigo sky, Brad looked down at the five banks of traffic running into London like the spokes of a wheel into its hub. The coloured guide lights of the arterial circuits stood out from the aura of blue commercial lighting. Along the broad, geometrically straight outroads he saw cars speeding to full power of 150/200 m.p.h., whilst those in the West End's brilliantly-lit labyrinth had to slow down to the speed limit of 40 m.p.h. Above the orderly banks of streets loomed the high viaduct through which the incoming traffic spiralled until they reached their desired level. The city looked good and Astorola had it at her feet. After to-night she would be the highest paid performer in Britain. Brad felt so good that he gave the taxi pilot a £5 note tip when he put the craft down within ten yards of the rear terrace entrance to the house.

Brad expected Astorola to come out to greet him, but although the lounge lights were on, the house was unusually quiet. When his wife was alone she nearly always had the radio or the televocscope blaring. Astorola was addicted to noise, one thing she couldn't bear was absolute silence. He had even had incidental music put into the act to obviate those breathless moments of hushed silence when she did anything extraordinary. The odd prickling sensation of foreboding he had suffered so many times since meeting Astorola fluttered through him. He pressed the external switch and the door slid noiselessly open. So she

had not switched the locking device into position! He pushed through the heavy curtains into the full glare of light. He gasped, his eyes dilated.

The crumpled form of a man in evening dress lay sprawled across the centre of the floor. Brad moved forward slowly, one foot jerking in front of the other, almost uncontrolled, as if he were being manipulated by strings. At a glance he recognised Carlos. He bent down and felt him. Dead.

"Brad! Brad! I'm so glad you've come!"

He looked up at Astorola framed in the doorway. It seemed that only her dress was standing before him, then her face and arms appeared. It was uncanny, but he attributed the illusion to the shock of discovering the corpse.

"What happened?" he asked. He looked round for a chair, sat on its edge, then stared back at Carlos. "He's dead."

"I know," said Astorola. "I killed him."

"You what?" Panic raged through him and left him in a cold sweat. His mind pricked needle sharp—a thousand implications stabbing their consequences at him. "How? Why?"

"He followed me home to-night. When the chauffeur went, Carlos came into the house. He said he knew my secret."

"So you killed him?"

She nodded.

"Did you have to be so drastic?"

She shrugged her shoulders and actually smiled. "This seemed the safest way."

"Safest?" he echoed. "Do you realise what you've done? You'll be charged with murder, disintegrated in a lethal chamber if you're found guilty."

"How can they say I murdered him? There's nothing to show I murdered him."

Brad flashed a quick glance at the body. The usually smooth hair was in place, the eyes fixed in a horrified expression but there were no marks, no trace of blood. "Then how did you do it?" he asked.

"I hypnotized him to death, it leaves no traces."

Brad stared hard at her, fear rising like a hard knot in his throat. "You—you mean you killed him just by looking at him?"

Her short curls bobbed as she nodded her head.

"But—but——"

"Another of my tricks, as you call them," she explained.

Brad trembled. "I need a drink," he gulped, getting up. He tossed back two stiff doses of Venusian brandy and felt better. "Are you sure your hypnosis will leave no organic traces?" he asked.

"Certain," she assured him.

"Then we'll call in a doctor. Tell him that Carlos merely passed out on you. It's risky, but it seems the only way to save us getting mixed up with the police. Farbitt would be on to it

if Carlos disappeared without any trace."

Brad immediately phoned the nearest doctor. He arrived in a few minutes in a super-drive emergency service car.

"Well, doctor?" asked Brad, after the body had been examined.

The doctor was tall, grey-haired, with twinkling eyes and bushy eyebrows. "It looks a simple case of heart failure," he said. "But the deceased was only a youngish man. I don't know his medical history." His brows knitted together ruminatively. "I think under the circumstances I'll have to call in the police."

With difficulty Brad swallowed his objection, realising that he would probably arouse suspicion. "As you say, doctor," he murmured. But the words were an effort.

The police arrived and began their routine questioning. Carlos's doctor was traced. His medical sheet was flashed on a telescreen and that closed the case as far as suspicion of murder was concerned. Carlos had suffered from heart trouble and had been advised to keep off strong liquor. A few telescreen interviews proved that he had not taken the advice. The police were satisfied.

The following morning Brad was awakened by Astorola moving about the kitchen singing gaily. All night he had been thinking and dreaming about seeing her disembodied dress standing before him. He got up and burst into the kitchen. She looked up at him with surprise, her dark eyes sparkling.

"Astorola, I saw your dress standing in front of me last night," he said slowly. "For a few seconds it was there without you in it, then you appeared. What does it all mean?"

Guilt spread across her features, mingled with a frown. She looked away without speaking.

"Well?" he pressed.

She sighed, looked at him strangely, then said, "I was frightened when I saw Carlos dead. I thought somebody might come, so I disappeared."

"Disappeared? What do you mean? How?"

"I made myself invisible."

His jaw dropped. "You what?" he gasped.

"Made myself invisible. You not believe me?"

"No," he snapped, temper rising.

"You're a nice kind man, Brad," she said. "I didn't want you to know, but——" Her voice trailed off, her eyes stared directly ahead, there was a faint smile on her lips. Then, to his never-to-be forgotten astonishment, there was no smile, no lips, no eyes, just a black, frilly night dress.

"But you should not make me do it. Now there can be no show to-night."

"What's that?" His voice quivered with alarm.

"Ten to twelve hours have to pass before I come visible again."

Brad was stunned. His mind clawed for an idea. "You were not home for twelve hours last night before——"

"No, I had one corporanium tablet which I manged to conceal. They speed the return to visibility, but I have no more."

"Then we'll get some."

"That you cannot do, Brad. They only come from Jupiter."

He groaned. Then the showman in him leapt to the rescue. "I've got it!" he shouted, with excitement. "About twelve hours, you said?"

"Yes." The black frills were oddly immobile.

He glanced at his watch. "It's now seven-fifteen. The first show starts at six-thirty to-night. You could start the act invisible and come into view on the stage. It will be a sensation." His head pulsated with this brainwave. The macabre quality of the invisibility was forgotten. "This will be the greatest thing ever seen on the British stage. To-night we make history."

### CHAPTER III

**A**STOROLA'S first house act that evening was a sensation. The audience gaped in awed silence. The only sound was the soft, stirring incidental music. Gradually her face began to appear, filling the gap between the black dress and black turban in which she had carried out the first part of her performance. A brilliant spotlight fixed on her. A few gasps, then a scream shattered the lilt of the music. The curtain came down when she was fully visible; the applause thundered. The audience called her back time and time again. She floated over them, produced the most incredible articles from the most inconceivable places. They were spellbound. London had never seen such magic.

There was a minor stampede for the second house. Rumour had circulated that Astorola would disappear on the stage. The show was late in starting, the police had to be called to disperse the crowd outside the theatre. At last they got under way. Even Astorola's preliminary marvels failed to create the usual suspense. The audience were waiting for one thing. It came with a rumble of drums. The powerful spotlight focused upon her as she walked to the front of the stage. She twisted the black turban round her head, drew on long black gloves, so that only her face, neck and arms from elbow to shoulder were visible. Her eyes rolled expressively, then fixed on the back of the theatre. Her flesh faded from sight, leaving the turban, dress and gloves dazzling in the arc of light. She moved and the black apparel went with her.

Nobody had told Astorola how to carry on from this point. The curtain should have come down, but even the hard-boiled stage hands were gathered in the wings, transfixed. The black turban came off first, then the gloves, followed by the dress; all thrown to the audience. Astorola was left nakedly invisible on the stage. Her paraphernalia table was upturned. She juggled

with silver cylinders and red handkerchiefs. She left the stage and went among the audience. Shrieks of laughter rose in pitch to shrieks in panic. Pandemonium broke out. The curtain came down and the orchestra struck up in full blast.

Recovering from the shock and the fever of excitement, Brad rushed to Astorola's dressing room. She wasn't there. He carried out a systematic search of the theatre, shouting her name anxiously. Finally he decided to go home, but phoned first to see if she had gone home without the car. Again he drew a blank. Wearily he went towards the stage door. Jase Farbitt was lingering in the shadows.

Brad grabbed him by the lapels of his coat. "Have you seen my wife?" he demanded.

In spite of his inferiority in size, Farbitt smiled. "Perhaps she's gone back to her own planet. To-night's performance convinces me that she's no ordinary Earth creature."

"Does it!" snapped Brad. "Well, I'd be sure of your facts before you start making rash statements. You might land yourself in trouble."

Farbitt wriggled free. "I think if there's any trouble, Thursby, you're going to be on the receiving end of it."

Brad recognised the truth in this observation, but he betrayed nothing.

The journey home was fast and fearful. Brad went over the host of possibilities in his mind. None of them got him anywhere, but whatever way he explored there seemed only one outcome for him—the lunar catacombs, tektite digging in the pumice graveyard.

When he reached the house it was empty. He sat in the lounge, drank a lot, smoked even more. At last he dozed in a chair through sheer exhaustion. But he kept waking with fitful starts. His snatches of dreams were so fantastic that he had difficulty in distinguishing dream from reality.

Soon after dawn Astorola appeared, wearing trousers and her face muffled in a scarf and hat. Brad made some coffee. When he joined her she was normal.

"Brad, you're in great danger," she said.

"That's an understatement," he sighed. "Jase Farbitt suspects something. Once he opens his mouth the whole machinery of national, international and inter-planetary law will be down on us."

"It doesn't concern your petty Earth officials," she said. "There are some of my people here. I detected them in the audience last night."

"All right, tell me the worst," he murmured.

"My people wanted me punished by Earth authorities. They are angry with you for protecting me. They come for you. I must leave you, for they can always locate me with an electrical aura detector compass."

Brad stood up and squared his shoulders. "I don't know what an aura detector compass is, but this I do know. You and I are staying together. To the end, if necessary."

"But, Brad, there is a burolovane lying secreted beneath the earth. It has a crew of ten men. They'll each have explicit orders and weapons far superior to anything Earth can produce. The electrical aura detector compass is a device with which they can track down any person on Jupiter. Every person has a certain chemical and electrical potentiality, but each one is different. On Earth you use fingerprints to identify people, but on Jupiter we use chemical and electrical identification."

"And will this device work on me?"

"I should imagine so. But they've got to get near enough to obtain an initial reading."

"Well?"

"You want me to stay with you?"

He bent over her, experiencing genuine affection for the first time. "Whatever happens," he said. "Do you remember pledging your loyalty to Earth?"

She nodded.

"This is the testing time. Do you still stand by it?"

She was silent for several seconds, her head bowed. Then she looked up and met his enquiring gaze. "Yes, Brad. I stand by it."

"Even if it means killing your own people?"

She did not flinch as she replied, "Yes, you are now my life."

He walked across the room, sat on the arm of her chair and kissed her. "That burolovane and its occupants must be destroyed," he said. "We can only do that by warning the proper authorities."

"But, Brad, it will be dangerous. Think of the consequences,"

"I've thought of them. Those men have very little to distinguish them from Earth people, if you're any indication of the normal Jupitan. You are the only person on Earth with knowledge of Jupitan ways. The authorities will have to be guided by you, and you won't co-operate without me. That would guarantee our freedom. I'm going to get on to Henlow, he's the man for this job."

Professor Henlow was in the Sussex house in less than an hour. Brad showed him into the lounge.

"You say your matter is urgent?" said Henlow.

"Yes, Professor, very urgent." Brad poured drinks all round, then sat down. "The truth is, my wife came here from Jupiter."

Henlow was in the act of raising a glass to his lips. He hesitated for a split-second, then continued his movement. His steel-grey eyes were hard, his lips tight and determined when he looked at them again. "Go on," he said. There was a snap of authority in his voice.

Astorola sat discreetly silent as Brad related the full story from the time of her appearance in his office. "So you see, professor, there's a Jupitan craft on Earth and its ten occupants at large," concluded Brad.

"And the responsibility is yours for not notifying the authorities of the first Jupitan landing," snapped Henlow, assuming a different role from the easy-going conversationalist. "In six months some precautions could have been taken. Now the menace is among us and we are completely unprepared."

Brad gulped, realising the truth of the official view. "We have Astorola," he countered. "Her knowledge will be of inestimable value."

"If the Security Police and Vigilant Brigade choose to trust her."

"They've got to trust her," snapped Brad. "It's our only hope."

"That might be the common sense view, but——"

"You're the Head of the Vigilant Brigade. What are your views?" Brad interrupted.

Henlow turned to Astorola. "You are a member of the highest tribe of Jupiter's populace, am I right?"

She nodded.

"And you were a scientist?"

"I worked on what you would call scientific discovery."

"I gathered that from our conversation the other night. In which case, your co-operation will be needed. There's one or two things I must discuss with you. But first of all I have to contact London."

"There's a phone at your side, Professor," said Brad.

Henlow glanced at Astorola. "If you don't mind I'll use an extension in another room, Thursby. You will show me the way."

Brad took the professor into the next room. "Do you want me to go?"

"No, you'd better stay and hear what trouble you've caused."

Brad sat and listened. Henlow first phoned the Security Police headquarters to issue general warnings of the presence of aliens from another planet. He ordered the International Vigilant Brigade to send a party of hand-picked men down to the house, he also arranged for a detachment of his personal staff to be brought down from his space-station headquarters. The Central Observation Bureau were warned to keep a sharp-lookout for the burolovane and the approach of any similar craft. The Bureau of Space Exploration were informed. Agents on Mars, Venus and the Moon were alerted.

"And now I've a personal call to make," said Henlow. "I don't think——" He broke off and covered the mouthpiece with his hand. "Pity this is not a visiophone. Somebody is listening in. They've just raised the receiver in the other room. I heard the metallic click."

Brad turned deathly white. "It's not Astorola," he declared. "What makes you so sure?"

"She gave me her solemn pledge that she would be loyal."

Henlow's eyes bored into him. "We can't afford to be sentimental. I'll keep talking, you go round the back of the house to look through the window. Don't move from there until I join you. I'll be able to hear any spoken word over this line."

Brad crept out, his head buzzing with doubt. He reached the window and gasped with shock. A tall man dressed in a one-piece seamless slouch suit stood in front of Astorola, the telephone receiver in his hand. Brad could see his wife's face, the eyes glaring and horrible, fixed on the person before her.

Brad looked about, then jumped like a startled rabbit as something touched his arm. It was Henlow.

"One of our friends?" he queried.

"I'm going in," said Brad.

"Stay here." He held a restraining grip on Brad's arm. "He's still holding the receiver, but there's nothing to hear. Your wife must be putting him under hypnosis."

Astorola's eyes dilated into twin balls of fire. The man's right hand moved slowly towards a holster containing a curious, knobbly weapon. Brad edged forward, but Henlow checked him. There could be no argument against such a grip.

The hand travelling towards the weapon shook violently, then dropped limp to the man's side. The telephone fell to the table with a dull metallic clatter. The Jupitan swayed, finally collapsing in a crumpled heap.

Brad broke free and dashed into the room. "Astorola, are you all right?" he gasped.

She smiled faintly, relaxing back and closing her eyes. But Brad could still remember the staring eyes. He would never forget them.

Henlow bent over the body. "He's dead," he said.

Brad shuddered.

"That it seems leaves only nine of them," said Henlow. "I'll arrange for the body to be taken away." He addressed Astorola. "You'd better rest, I shall be requiring your full co-operation. The Governmental Bureau has placed me in supreme command of this affair."

## CHAPTER IV

AN hour after the hypnotic incident, with the body removed and armed guards stationed on every door of the house, Professor Henlow faced up to Astorola resolutely.

"I should have had you placed under arrest," he said. "Your husband also has violated our laws in many ways. He is liable to banishment to the graveyard of the Moon. I realise, however,

that if we are to operate successfully the enforcing of pettifogging regulations will be futile. But make no mistake, Thursby. You are not vindicated. I hold you personally responsible for your wife's loyalty. You are both to obey my orders. Is that understood?"

Brad nodded, too overwhelmed to speak.

"I need hardly warn you that the slightest slip will have dire consequences."

It was Astorola who spoke first. "We will help you in any way we can, Professor Henlow."

He acknowledge her remark with a tight smile. "Good. Then I suggest we start at once. I have issued general warnings all over the country for the capture of the burolovane crew, if that's possible. They are to be shot on sight. All I.V.B. men will be armed with automatic atom-blasters, heat guns and bacteria diffusers. Is there any reason why the Jupitans should be immune to these weapons?"

"If they are we don't stand much hope," put in Brad.

Henlow ignored him, concentrated on Astorola. "I don't think so," she said. "But their weapons will be far more devastating."

"That is a chance we have to take. We'll have to learn by experience in that direction. The most important thing, as I see it, is to locate the burolovane and cripple it. At all costs prevent it returning."

"I can tell you its exact location," said Astorola. "I visited it last night. It is beneath the surface of a fallow field on the fringe of Downeham in Surrey."

"Downeham," repeated Henlow. "A sizeable village. That rules aerial bombing out. Have you any ideas how the craft can be crippled?"

Astorola pondered. "The burolovane body is made of pluronium. The only thing that can really harm it is the isionic ray, which has a pluronium base. No earth chemical possesses sufficient generative heat power to penetrate pluronium. None of Earth's ballistics are powerful enough to paralyse the burolovane, unless they are carried out on such a large scale that vast areas of countryside are also devastated."

Brad turned white, but Henlow was a scientist experienced in the ways of modern warfare. "Pluronium," he said. "Can this be found on Earth?"

"Only in tektite form, in so small quantities that it would be useless. Even so it would be inactive. Only the pluronium mined on Jupiter is capable of development. The chemical action of the methane and amonia vapour atmosphere on the ore is responsible for its strength and impregnability."

"And you say that the isionic ray is an amalgam with a pluronium base?"

Astorola nodded. Brad sat with his mouth gaping wider every minute.

"That ship must never return to Jupiter," Henlow said, almost speaking to himself. "It looks as if we've got to produce an isionic ray. Have you got any article made of pluronium which I could analyse?"

"I have nothing to remind me of Jupiter," said Astorola.

Henlow's brow puckered. "If I could analyse pluronium there might be some way of producing it from our own ores, or even minerals mined on other planets under our control. A chemical composition might be made to produce the desired qualities."

"True," admitted Astorola. "But——"

Brad burst to life. "Didn't you say that the fish scale dress you wore in my office was made of pluronium?" he cried out.

"Yes, but you disposed of that."

Brad looked sheepish. "I said I did," he admitted. "In actual fact, I kept it. It's still in the old property box in my store-room."

"And it can be obtained?" queried Henlow.

Brad nodded. Astorola looked thoughtful, accusation burned in her eyes as she glanced at her husband.

"Well, that solves one problem. We'll drive up for it and take it to my laboratory. In the meantime, we've got to take some precautions. Mrs. Thursby, what do you think is the main object of this mission from Jupiter?"

"To kill my husband."

"Come now," said Henlow. "There must be deeper motives than that. If that was the sole object it could have been achieved by now."

"I suppose so," admitted Astorola.

"Oh, definitely," chipped in Brad, blustering in a false display of unconcern.

"To your knowledge has there ever been a consideration of an Earth invasion from Jupiter?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Certain."

"Is it possible that having proved the efficacy of the burolovane for Earth landing that there has been a change of policy?"

"It is, of course, possible," she granted.

"Would you agree with me that this latest move makes it more than a mere possibility?"

"Yes, I think I would."

"And in the event of this happening you are still prepared to fight against your own people?"

"You've made me responsible for that, haven't you?" snapped Brad.

"I have, very much so," said Henlow, eyeing him sternly. "And I want to make you aware of the magnitude of your undertaking."

"I maintain what I said before," declared Astorola. "Have I not killed one of them for you already?"

"You have, but one life is a cheap price to pay for our good faith."

"Henlow, if you're trying to be——"

"I'm merely doing my duty," he interrupted. "I may not be as gullible as yourself, Thursby."

Brad stood corrected and kept quiet.

"If this burolovane should take-off, have you any idea of the damage it could do?" asked Henlow.

"If it carries a full war-load of helioxide it could devastate an area of a hundred mile radius or more."

Henlow remained silent, his lips clamped tight. Then with a complete change of face he smiled. "I think you'd better go and pack your things," he said to Astorola. "You and your husband will come with me to London. You'll stay in my laboratory quarters for the time being. I'm quite satisfied that you'll give me the closest co-operation."

"You've got a funny way of showing it," Brad put in. "You'd better do as he says, Astorola."

She got up and left the room without a word. Henlow spun round to Brad.

"It is imperative that we have that dress to which you referred," he said, picking up the telephone. "I must analyse it to find out the properties of pluronium. I'm having spaceships standing by for immediate take-off to the Moon, Venus and Mars to get any special minerals which might be required." He broke off and spoke into the telephone, transforming his remarks into clear-cut orders.

When he had lowered the receiver, Henlow turned to Brad. His eyes flashed with concentrated purpose and his jaw was prominent as he said, "I'm having the Downham field surrounded with every kind of war weapon we possess. They may not be effective and they'll only be used if the burolovane attempts to take-off. I sincerely hope it doesn't, for we couldn't possibly evacuate the whole vulnerable area in time. Anyway, a mass evacuation would arouse suspicion among the people and probably cause panic. Our only real hope is to capture the remaining nine men."

"That's not going to be easy."

"It's going to be the damndest job. But I'm getting the best possible men from three planets to deal with them. We must stop them at all costs. The whole future of our planet might well depend upon it. Come on, Thursby. Get your wife, we must start moving."

The three of them hurried out to the waiting car. Henlow

swung open the rear door. "Thursby, you and your wife sit in here. I'll sit with the driver."

Astorola sat down, then suddenly cried out in alarm. "There's one of them near! Close to us!" she called out.

The chauffeur moved to start the car.

"It's him!" yelled Astorola.

Henlow dived across the car, but the man eluded him and escaped by the driver's door. He ran madly across the lawn, then dashed into the cover of a clump of bushes. Henlow was on his feet at once, in pursuit, a tiny jixta revolver spurting concentrated death from his hand. There was a loud cry, then a fierce spurt of purple flame leapt in the air, dropped in a swooping arc and seared everything in its path.

"Turn the car and shine the headlights over here," yelled Henlow.

Brad obeyed. Guards came running from all parts of the house. After a few minutes delay and a spate of peremptory orders, Henlow returned to the car.

"That was a near thing," he said. "That fiend could have accounted for the three of us. As it was, we only just missed his heat beam. It would have melted us to nothing. But at least we've proved that they're susceptible to jixta. It's probably the most effective weapon in the world." He settled in the driver's seat and started up. "We might not have pluronium to pierce the burolovane, but the Jupitans won't get far if they come too close to jixta. Anyway, there are only eight of them left. Now we'd better make for your office, Thursby."

The car speeded along the wide straight roadway until it came into the five bank city traffic system. Negotiating the selector terminus, they then travelled at regulation city speed along Shaftesbury Avenue. The journey was one of comparative silence, only broken by staccato flashes of necessary conversation. Each of the occupants had remained pensive with their own deep thoughts. Each shared the common danger, but their approach to it was individual.

"Will there be anybody in your office?" asked Henlow.

"Definitely not," said Brad. "Janie, my secretary, believes in observing regular hours."

"Sensible girl. I'll park the car round the back and we'll all go into the building together." Henlow swung the car with practiced ease, drawing it to a smooth stop. He moved out of the driver's seat nimbly, his eyes alert, his hand close to the shoulder holster containing his jixta revolver.

Brad led the way along the street which had changed very little with the passage of years. Much had been constructed on levels above it, but the Avenue itself had been preserved against the cubic monsters of modernity. Unlocking the door of his office, Brad stood back and gasped. The place had been ransacked, the contents of the storeroom flung from one ex-

tremity to the other.

Henlow moved inside. "We've been forestalled. The pluronium dress is obviously gone. Look round, Thursby. Although I don't hold much hope."

The visiophone rang. Brad stood transfixed with shock, mouth open. "Who can that be?" he gasped.

"Probably for me," said Henlow. "I gave my expected time of arrival here." He lifted the phone and switched on the vision screen to see his caller.

"Ah, Barrett!" he said, as a heavy pugilistic face with large eyes flickered into view. "Have the men been posted?"

"Yes, Chief. And two of the enemy believed to have been sighted."

"Did you get them?"

"No, Chief. They disappeared into thin air."

Henlow grunted. "We'll have to expect that sort of thing. Listen, I want reports of all movements sent Brigade HQ. The whereabouts of these chaps are to be plotted as far as possible. By the way, where are you?"

"Downeham."

"Right, I'm going to my laboratory now. Let me know any new development. We've accounted for two of them. The rest are to be shot on sight, they're susceptible to the jixta. Have them issued to every patrolman. I don't think there's much hope of catching one of them alive, but if it can be done without prejudicing the lives of our men, then try to do so. But be careful, they'll possibly have the power of making themselves invisible."

"Invisible?" gulped Barrett, his jaw dropping. "But, Chief, how——"

"Oh no account are those out of the ship to be allowed to get back. I'm getting on to the Air Bureau. They'll have the whole area sprayed with tetracine snow. Keep a constant lookout for footprints. It will be your only way of locating them if they play invisible tactics."

"Yes, Chief." Barrett scratched at his balding head. "Is that all?"

"For the moment." Henlow switched off. "Any luck?" he asked Brad.

"No, the dress has gone."

Henlow was momentarily silent and thoughtful. "The one who came here could have got back to Downeham, I suppose," he said, thinking aloud. "Two of them are disposed of and two have been located. That means there can still be six of them inside the ship. How many of them are needed to take the ship off in a case of emergency?"

"Two could possibly do it," said Astorola.

"Hmm, that's bad!"

"What's wrong, Professor?" asked Brad. "If you've got your men into position can't you blast something into the burolovane?"

Henlow turned to Astorola. "Would you mind searching in the storeroom for your dress? A small part of it might have become detached in some way. The merest particle would be enough to enable me to make an analysis."

Astorola obeyed and Henlow went across and closed the door on her.

"You did that to get her out of the way!" flashed Brad.

"Of course, I did, and she had the sense to realise it. I've got to think. I was relying on this pluronium analysis. The whole complexion changes if we can't find any."

"Can't you use something else?"

Henlow's eyes narrowed. "Yes, I could," he said slowly.

"But at a great risk. If we can produce this isionic ray, according to your wife, we're assured of success. Anything else is an unknown quantity and I can't afford to experiment. I might not cripple the burolovane or kill the crew aboard. An attack, however, would probably force them into taking off. I want to avoid that, their helioxide load sounds dangerous."

"I get the idea," said Brad.

"We'll attack with everything we've got if it does try to take-off. I have sound detectors waiting to pick up the first quiver of a starting motor. But while the thing's underground I want to keep it there."

"You can say that for me, too."

"If there was only some way of forcing them out. I'd give a——"

Astorola came bursting out of the storeroom, flushed with excitement. "I've found something!" she cried. "I remember now, one of the clips was loose. It must have broken off." She handed Henlow a gleaming blue-silver clasp. "There you are, that's made of pluronium." There was triumph in her eyes.

Henlow examined it carefully, wrapped it in a handkerchief and slipped it in a pocket under his jixta holster. "Looks can be deceptive," he said. "I'm not certain, of course, but I think I've seen ore like this mined on the Moon. I'll have a ship go up for some, then we'll compare the two by chemical analysis. In the meantime, young lady, we've work to do on the details of this isionic ray."

When they reached Henlow's laboratory a vision call came through from Downham. "We've got them, Chief," said Barrett triumphantly. But he looked a sorry figure. There was no hair at all left on his head and an ugly wound stretched down the side of his face.

"Both of them?" asked Henlow.

"No, three of them," said the Brigade officer. "But at a sad cost. They went mad through the village. More than thirty civilians were killed and a large part of the village is still burning. We lost twelve I.V.B. men. Two were shot by our own weapons. Most of the time we were blazing away at footprints."

"Good work, Barrett! The damage done is small compared to what could have happened. It seems pretty certain now that the other five of them are in the ship. Have you got everything covered?"

"There are heat beams and short-range blasters all round the field."

"Good. They're to be manned every minute, ready to operate at a moment's notice. Let me know if anything develops. If you pick up anything on the sound detectors inform me at once."

After a careful analysis of the plutonium clasp, Henlow discovered that he could produce the desired chemical properties from an ore mined on the Moon and a base metal indigenous to Mars. Two space-ships of the hyper-modern Zenith class were launched to bring the precious cargoes back to Earth. The whole venture became a race against time.

## CHAPTER V

PRIOR to its invasion from Jupiter, Downeham had been one of the few picturesque rural villages which had been preserved against the stamps of modernity which predominated in most other parts of the country. The roads leading to the village were narrow and winding, archaic in their tar block surface. The surrounding countryside rose and fell in smooth hillocks of nature's fertility. The hedgerows twisted in a tangle of leaves of varying shape and shades of green. Here and there clusters of berries and isolated wild flowers provided a splash of colour. The landscape was quiet and bucolic, free from enormous buildings, the ramshackle of cargo space ports and the whine of space-ships.

Henlow drove slowly. Brad and Astorola sat in silence.

As they topped a rise the village came into full view. It looked as if it had been hit by a hurricane, then struck by lightning. Gaping holes were seen among the buildings, the charred remains of tiny cottages trembled against the background of grey-blue sky. There were visible traces where heat had made black scorched paths across the fields, eaten into the hedges and burned out-buildings to the ground. The houses remaining were strangely quiet, for Henlow had ordered an evacuation of the civilian population. At the other side of the village, however, there was a cluster of newly-erected pre-fabricated military huts. They drove up to the barricade and were halted by two heavily armed guards of the International Vigilant Brigade.

Henlow was admitted with a smart salute. Barrett came out of the temporary Operations Hut as the car drew up. His face and head were swathed in bandages.

Henlow immediately became hard and inquisitive, anxious to have a clear understanding of the disposition of the men and

weapons at his command. "I doubt if we'll get the basic metals for the production of the isionic ray in time," he said. "Which means we'll have to fight this thing out with our own weapons." He looked at Barrett with unwavering eyes. "Our lives may depend on our preventing this thing taking off. I want to go round everything before deciding our course of action."

They reached the first heat-developer unit, a large machine mounted on a domed tractor. The tractor could ride up the side of a building if necessary and it was capable of discharging six synchronised jets of nitro-methane fire. The new Brigade men were cheerful and itching for action, those who had taken part in the earlier Jupitan chase were not quite so anxious.

Henlow went next to the gleaming barrelled pom-pom blasters, beside them were racks of incendiary rockets with warheads of Martian nicopolyceine. There was a blaster unit positioned between each heat-developer, and this sequence went on round the whole perimeter of the field. The operational area was covered in a thick blanket of tetracine snow, with observers posted in vantage positions to watch for the appearance of footprints.

Henlow surveyed the field with narrowed concentrative eyes. His mind was working icicle sharp, matching all possible counter actions against his plan of attack. He suddenly turned to Barrett, a gleam of hope radiating in his eyes. "Barrett, I've got it! We need a squadron of low-flying precision bombers to drop nicopolyceine bombs directly above the burolovane."

"But I thought——"

"Don't interrupt," snapped Henlow, rapt in thought. "The aircraft drop their bombs and the heat-developers close in aiming their combined fire at the centre of the field."

Barrett was still perplexed.

"The isionic ray is constituted of the two main properties we are using—nicopolyceine and nitro-methane," Henlow explained. "These are the two materials the space-ships have gone to find in their crude form. But there is a chance that if we use the two weapons simultaneously we will get the same effect as the isionic ray. Get the idea?"

"It seems a bit dodgy."

"Of course, it is. But it gives us a fighting chance of smashing that thing underground. I'd sooner take that chance than let the burolovane leave the ground."

"As you say, Chief."

"Right, now get the orders out to the heat-developer commanders. I'll get on to the Air Bureau. Split-second timing is going to be of paramount importance. And every man going forward must have a heat-resisting suit."

Barrett went off shouting orders in all directions.

It was dark when everything was prepared. Henlow took Brad and Astorola on the wireless relay tractor, which was guiding

the ring of heat-developers into position. Outside the ring of approaching tractors many powerful lights were flashing, among them a guide path of ground-to-air beacons for the approaching aircraft. On the field the slow moving tractors formed another ring of light. Henlow had established that the helioxide would not explode unless detonated by the Jupitans, but would give off a deadly gas. Accordingly all men engaged in the operation were clad in heat-resisting suits and a special respiratory system.

Henlow received a call from Barrett in the Operations Hut. "There's a recording on the ground sound detector, Chief," he said. "They must be starting the motors."

"That only gives us a few minutes," breathed Henlow. He cut his walkie-talkie set and connected up with the squadron commander leading the aircraft. "There's no time for a trial run," he said. "Come straight in and drop your bombs on the target area. Fire a signal flare with your bombs, and remember, our lives depend on your accuracy."

"You can depend on us. Roger."

Henlow switched off and spoke on walkie-talkie. "Close in," he said. "Keep coming in at minimum speed. The moment you see the aircraft flash their signal, fire into the centre of the ring."

He looked up, scanning the sky through his glastex facepiece. The wing tip navigation lights came into view. "Firing time imminent," he said. "Remain at the ready."

"Sound volume increasing," cut in Barrett.

Henlow strained forward, peering into the ring of darkness in the centre of the field. "Blasters ready on the outside," he roared. "Train your sights above our heads. Fire if anything comes up. Heat-developer commanders, have your elevation mechanism ready in case you have to fire upwards. If you do, fire everything you've got, then take cover."

He knew that if the last contingency did materialise, nobody would be able to take cover.

"Coming over the target area now," the aircraft commander came in.

"Sound volume excessive," roared Barrett.

It was touch and go now. Henlow's lips were pressed tight. Voices rang through his head like a jangle of cracked bells. Seconds were like hours. His body was drenched in cold sweat.

"They must be preparing to take-off," yelled Barrett. "A new sound recorded."

Where were the aircraft, thought Henlow? In another few seconds the whole lot of them would be blown sky high. He switched on a powerful light beam, focussing on the centre of the field. It lit up the ring of eery tractors attended by glastex domed men. The earth was visibly trembling. He switched off the searchlight, not wishing to demoralize the men. Just as he was thinking it was too late the aircraft came over in formation. Red signal lights spat out. A whole ring of rocket-driven jets

of fire flashed out into the focal point of the field. The black maw of the earth seemed to devour them. There was a series of dull explosions. Henlow switched on the searchlight. The ring of tractors had been split up. Several of them were upended. Another explosion shook the earth. Henlow felt the tractor rise from beneath him. He was conscious of a flashing of lights and sickening thuds of noise, then he was engulfed in silence.

He came to and was immediately conscious of speed. "What's happened?" he gasped.

It was Brad who answered. "We're getting out of the gas area. Barrett has stayed behind with a squad of men. There was a lot of casualties, but the burolovane was silenced."

"Is it wrecked?"

"I should say so. There's a huge crater in the middle of the field, the remains scattered far and wide."

Henlow lay back. "Well, that's one part of the job done," he said. "But this business is by no means over. Have we got a gas detector on this vehicle?"

A young officer answered, "I'm with it, Chief."

"Let me know as soon as you get a zero reading. And tell the driver to hurry."

Once out of the contaminated area, Henlow linked up with Barrett and gave him instructions. He returned to Brigade HQ in London, sending Brad and Astorola to his laboratory.

In the Brigade offices Henlow was met by a tall, youthful-looking man in an immaculate grey uniform with a space pilot's brevet over the left breast.

"You look worried, Fairbairn," said Henlow, with a smile. "It's all right, it's all over. The burolovane is finished."

"Good," said Fairbairn. But his brow remained clouded. "Congratulations, Chief. That's not the trouble, however."

Henlow sighed. He looked and sounded tired. "What now?" he asked.

Fairbairn led him into a room with large maps of the solar system on the walls and a huge plotting table in the centre. "It's the two Zenith ships, Chief. One has left Mars with its cargo, but nothing has been heard of Taskey's ship since it landed at Lunar Base. I've been on the radio for an hour. I can't get anything from the Moon. In fact, everything up there is completely dead."

"Have you been on to Castur, the space-station?"

"Yes, they can't establish radio contact either."

"Any explanation?"

"Nothing. Everything seems to indicate that the sets are alive, but nobody answering."

Henlow's eyes narrowed. He looked at Fairbairn searchingly. "Interruption from Jupiter, you think?"

"That's what I'm afraid of."

"Yes," said Henlow, stroking his lean jaw. "It looks as if we'll

have to go up and find out what's happened. Taskey is a friend of yours, isn't he?"

"A very close friend, Chief."

"Then you'll want to be with us?"

Fairbairn nodded gratefully.

"Right, we want a crew. I'll skipper, you can be co-pilot Lee as astrophysicist. Ames as navigator. Sparta on the radio. Stevens can be engineer and Adlai come along as general handyman and my personal assistant. We'll use one of the ships being prepared for the expeditionary force. Get on to the B.S.E. and arrange it. Round up the crew, then all get along to the space-port. I'll meet you there. By the way, there'll be two passengers—one of them a woman."

Fairbairn blinked incredulously.

"A very unusual woman." He was about to tell him of Astorola's origin, but decided against it. Such information could easily cause contention among the members of the crew, the last thing wanted within the narrow confines of a space-ship on a long journey. After all, this could be the beginning of a trip to Jupiter.

Brad Thursby was not pleased with the prospect of going to the Moon. Even in the modern age of travel enormities he had lived all his life with his two feet on the ground. He saw no reason to change his ways. He started to object.

Henlow immediately applied the thumbscrew of pressure. "This way you go as a visitor, Thursby," he snapped. "The alternative is to go by force as a creature doomed for the penal colony."

Brad swallowed hard. There was more truth in this remark than he cared to dwell upon.

Arriving at the space-port, Brad was amazed at the number of gleaming white and silver space-ships with their noses pointing ominously skywards. "Looks as if you're planning a space armada," he said.

Henlow smiled grimly, said nothing, but drove across the launching ground to meet Fairbairn.

"There she is, Chief. A real beauty!" said the young man.

Brad followed the direction of the outstretched finger with a sinking feeling in his stomach. Beauty was the last word he would have applied to the long-bodied ship. It looked a monster to him.

"Crew all ready?" asked Henlow.

"As you detailed." A wave of his hand brought a group of grey uniformed men moving towards them. Astorola and Brad were quickly introduced. All the crew were grinning, except Sparta, the radio-operator, whose thin lips were drawn back in an expression of pensive expectancy which seemed to accentuate his high brow and prematurely balding head. The rest were like a

group of schoolboys about to embark on a treat excursion; all their eyes were on Astorola.

Henlow dispersed them with a few peremptory orders. "We'll be ready to launch in half an hour," he said to Brad. "You two can have a look round. Don't get in the way of the crew and don't leave the launching area."

He swung away with long determined strides. Brad stood transfixed, staring at the immensity of the glistening white ship resting on its ungainly shock absorber legs and supported by braced outriggers. The name *Veno Aegis* was painted on her tail vanes. The pointed nose towered upwards at such a height that it filled Brad with an overwhelming sense of insignificance. The rows of observation ports climbed up like rungs on a ladder, ever upwards, beyond the nose, directing Brad's uneasy thoughts to the mysteries of upper space. He felt like running. If Astorola had not been with him he would have done so.

The suspense of waiting was cut short by Henlow's reappearance. "The ship's all ready," he said. "You'd better come aboard."

He led them towards the metal ladder of the lower hatchway. Brad climbed it without confidence, jumped as it telescoped up behind him. Then with a whirl of electric motion the airlock was sealed and escape became impossible. He followed Henlow through the engineer's cabin at the rear of the ship, through the lofty storage holds and troop-carrying compartments, where he was instructed how to use the acceleration couches.

Astorola was more at ease on the couch beside him. She smiled at him encouragingly, motioning him to lay back. He obeyed, steeling himself for the acceleration flattening he had heard so much about, but never actually experienced.

## CHAPTER VI

PROFESSOR HENLOW went into the forward pilot's cabin and surveyed the multiplicity of instruments and switches with swift-moving experienced eyes. He settled on his couch and switched on the inter-comm radio.

"Everything checked?" he queried.

"All at launching stations, Chief," Fairbairn replied.

Henlow flicked the siren switches warning ground engineers to take cover, then went round each member of the crew and received personal assurance of their readiness. A man could be crushed like an ant underfoot if he were not in correct position for the terrific launching acceleration.

"Remain at launching stations. We lift at minus five minutes." Henlow switched in the supporter struts. He flashed a red wink light to operate in the crew cabin. "Energize the heat-box, Stevens."

Alone in the power cabin Stevens smiled with a rubbery grin. His deft hands manipulated the rod controls, easing them out until the pile reached pre-lift heat.

Henlow received this information with a grunt, conscious of the sound now vibrating through the ship.

"Final circuit checks," he snapped at Adlai.

"Set to launch," came the terse reply.

"Strapped down comfortably, two passengers?"

Brad jumped as the words crackled in his ears. His stomach was trying to force its way through the restriction of his neck. The noise added to his tension. He answered back and saw Astorola do the same.

"Minus two minutes." Henlow's voice was as hard as steel.

Stevens was down on his couch. The heat was now right, the neutron indicator steady. He switched the first fuel pump on, then the whole row of pump switches one after the other. The power cabin pulsated with sound. He watched the needles indicating the build up of normal fuel pressure. He got through to the skipper.

Henlow's eyes were focussed on the instruments above his couch. He lay flat, a panel of switches on either side of him; his fingers restive over them. A snap flick and the magnetic ground locking clamps were released. The ship was now ready to lift.

His left hand whisked over the gyro switches, their hum added to the general noise.

"Minus ten seconds . . . nine . . . eight . . . seven . . ."

He threw another switch over. Then another and another. Everything was automatic now—fuel pumps, valve openings, pile heat. The ship was straining, vibrant with sound, waiting for the final touch off.

"Six . . . five . . . four . . ."

The firing button was in his hand.

"Three . . . two . . . CONTACT!"

The *Veno Aegis* leapt from the ground, the strain being equalised through the construction as she hung on a fierce blast of radioactive fire. The crew were squashed back on the cushions of their couches.

Brad panicked, his body was filled with lead. He couldn't move, the skin across his face was stiff and tightly drawn. He couldn't breathe. This was death. He was having all the life squeezed out of his body. It was a trap. Then as the feeling became unbearable it was relieved. Gradually the weight eased from his body until he felt that he was no weight at all. His head was absurdly light and fluttery. He felt like shouting out, dancing, going mad.

"You can release your attachment straps," said Henlow. "The two passengers take care. You'll float if you don't cling on to something."

Brad scrambled upwards, released himself in a frantic desire for movement. Astorola watched him with a knowing smile, satisfied to let him learn by experience. He undid the last strap on his legs and in a half-slumped position drifted in an ungainly posture to the top of the bulkhead separating them from the crew cabin. He whooped and raved in a seizure of relief. He felt that he had to do something outrageous rather than sit back and contemplate what had happened. But tiring of forced horseplay he manœuvred himself back to the couch, where Astorola had swung it into the position of a backed seat.

Lee, the astraphysicist, came through the dividing panel and grinned. "Any ill effects?" he asked.

"I haven't located my stomach yet," said Brad.

"Or found your space legs, I'll warrant."

"You warrant right," said Brad wryly.

Lee glanced at Astorola. "You look completely unconcerned, Mrs. Thursby."

She smiled. "This is not my first experience of space travel."

"Oh!" Lee seemed surprised. His deep dark eyes bored into her. Like the rest of the crew he was puzzled by her presence on board. It showed on every feature of his leathery face. "Any way, the Chief invites you into the crew cabin."

Having stumbled his way forward, Brad was surprised to see Henlow pouring over an astro-chart with Fairbairn. "Whose flying this thing?" he asked.

Ames, the navigator, answered, "She's on automatic," he said, then fastened his eye back on the astrostat and began making calculations on a pad clipped to his knee. He had a wide-browed studious head. His movements were jerky, and as he spun the dial of a computer his head tossed as if he had a tick. He looked as nervous as Brad felt, but his looks belied his reliability. Henlow's crew were specially-chosen men, and Ames had many times proved capable of rising to an emergency.

Conscious of Brad's eyes on him, the navigator said, "Have you had a look outside yet?"

"Don't think I could stomach it."

Ames pulled him across to the eyepiece of one of the viewers. "Take a look at that. You won't see anything like it anywhere on earth."

Brad gasped at the incredibly intense black void filled with the flickerless glitter of countless stars. It looked like a back-cloth of velvet against which a sloping whitewash brush had been flickered from a distance. The sun was a ball of fiery glory, its corona brilliant and breathtaking.

"Look at Earth," whispered Ames, manipulating the fulcrum point of the adjuster. "She's doesn't look so mighty from up here."

Brad saw the outline of the continents, the puffy miasma of swirling cloud, the red streak of the terminator disappearing

round the bulge of the planet in its passage of dividing night and day. Earth didn't look at all mighty. It looked too far away. Brad quickly turned to the safer sight of the crew cabin and human companionship.

He overheard Henlow saying, "Castur is in a stable orbit twenty-seven thousand miles from the Earth's surface."

Brad's stomach swirled again.

Henlow looked up. "Space travel is a boring business normally," he said. "You can be thankful that your first trip is a short one, Thursby."

"I should be more thankful if I'd never made the trip at all," put in Brad.

Sparta's grim visage confronted the radio controls. His voice had a hard edge to it as he began repeating, "*Veno Aegis* calling space-station, Castur."

"Ask them if they've heard anything from Lunar Base," Henlow butted in.

Sparta clearly enunciated his words, as if his life depended upon clarity. "Nothing, Chief. Moon completely dead," he replied back.

An unfortunate choice of words, thought Brad, even if it did only refer to radio transmissions.

The space-station was a small, man-made world spinning sluggishly beneath the *Veno Aegis*. Before he switched off the robot pilot and went in on manual controls, Henlow turned away from the brilliant phosphorescent light of the station and glanced out of the starboard observation panel at the great disc of the Earth. It was shrouded in a mist of diffused crimson colour. The sunset line cut across Europe, through the Arabian Desert and was moving towards Madagascar, before it swallowed up the Indian Ocean. Like most spacemen Henlow set his own planet apart from the solar system. Familiarly known as Terra, it was home and should be impervious to man's discoveries in limitless space. Man had reached beyond his own planetary environment, and in his discovery of new worlds, he had made enemies, opened their eyes to the possibility of their reaching for planetary domination. Terra had been in danger before. She had survived attack from Mars, ruthlessly annihilated the invaders and set up the machinery to keep the Martians within their own domicile by force. But now another danger frowned down from the millions of miles of space. There was life on Jupiter, the largest planet in the solar system; life of human standing with a more advanced intelligence, with a technology of its own, a people with a greater range of possibilities than Earth people. The planet itself was an unknown quantity—the world of the Great Red Spot, a spinning oblate disc of bright zones separated by dark belts. A planet which had to be explored, nay, conquered, if Earth was to retain her eminence. This was a new challenge coming from space.

His jaw jutted resolutely as he shifted his concentration to the landing ramps below. This was possibly the first stage of the inevitable journey to Jupiter. As the *Veno Ageis* went down, the winking lights of the landing system flashed into operation in alternations of green, red and purple. The ship touched down on the metal strip, speeded along the arrester banks in a blaze of lights. Automatic arms took over and guided the ship to a smooth halt in the clutches of the giant buffer-mesh fitting over the gleaming nose.

The arrival of the ship had been expected and there was a large reception committee out to meet Henlow. He came out of the pilot's cabin and reached for his grey space-suit. "Fairbairn and Adlai, you come with me," he said. "The rest of you can stay in the ship. Stevens, you see to the refuelling and organise the station crew in getting her to the launching cradle. I don't think we'll be here long."

The two young men were climbing into their bulky space-suits, grey with the gold I.V.B. badge on each lapel.

"Mrs. Thursby, will you stand by the radio? I may wish to consult you on certain points."

The rest of the crew looked at Astorola with increased respect. She must have specialised knowledge if she was to help the Chief decide their course of action.

Adlai lifted his glastex-fronted space-helmet into position. There was an easy grin on his face. He was a University student who had shocked his wealthy parents by giving up a traditional family career at the Bar to run away to space-travel as his ancestors might have run off to sea. But Adlai had earned his space-ticket the hard way, pushed himself through every branch of space duty. He could set his steady hand and keen brain to any task on the ship. Henlow looked upon him as one of the most promising men in the I.V.B., a possible successor to himself.

"Ready?" he asked.

The two men gave their assurance over walkie-talkie apparatus.

"Lee, on the airlock," said Henlow, and adjusted his helmet.

Space-clad, the three of them went to the central hatchway. The door opened and they stood in the equalising chamber together. The airlock whirled like an angry swarm of bees as pressures neutralised. Then the outer door slid open and the steel ladder slipped into position.

More grey-suited I.V.B. men came forward to greet them. They were led away to the huge blister in the centre of the space-station. They went through the massive airlock into the main building.

Henlow removed his helmet, and the others followed suit with an alacrity common to space-travellers. They were so accustomed to vastness that space-suits had a claustrophobic

effect. They escaped from them at the earliest opportunity.

"Well, Pearson?" said Henlow. "Anything new?"

The space-station commander shook his head. "Nothing more to report since my radio message."

"No signal from Lunar Base?"

"Not a sound. We can't get anything from her and it doesn't seem likely that she's receiving us."

"No sign of their escape ships being used?"

"Nothing." Pearson looked around at his officers for confirmation. They each nodded grave ascent. Like the commander their faces were lined and anxious. They looked to Henlow for an explanation.

"Nothing been observed on the detectors, no radar contact?"

Pearson wagged his head, his face screwed up and eyes staring with bewilderment.

"You've had the telescope on the Mare Serenitatis base, of course?"

"It's been manned ever since we discovered radio silence."

"Anything interesting?"

"That's the whole damned mystery, Chief. There doesn't seem to be anything wrong. Everything is in place."

Henlow's eyes narrowed, his brow blackened with thought. "No evidence of an attack? No recordings of strange craft?"

"Not a sign or single reading on any instrument. Nor any sign of life, either from the Base or the Mare Crisium penal colony. It's just as if everything has been snuffed out, the whole power supply brought to a standstill."

Henlow jerked with sudden thought. "How long has the radio been silent?"

"Four earth days."

"The Zenith ship with Taskey in command landed all right?"

"Yes, we got her touch-down signal. That's the last thing we heard."

Henlow was ponderously silent for several seconds. An aura of hushed expectancy hung over the group of officers.

"What do you make of it, Chief?" ventured Pearson. He spoke the words framing on every mouth.

"I don't quite know," said Henlow slowly. "I think I'll have a look on the telescope myself, then have a word with Mrs. Thursby. I've an idea that she might throw some light on this apparent mystery. Adlai, you come with me. Fairbairn, check ship arrangements. We'll be launching as soon as she's ready."

Adlai and Henlow followed behind the Commander as he led the way through a series of long passages to the far side of the dome enclosure, where they climbed a spiral staircase taking them past the huge control room crammed with instruments. They finally reached the observation blister.

The giant telescope filled the observation room; the slanting barrel of the instrument predominated, but many banks of

controlling devices were arranged within comfortable reach of the viewing seat. Henlow walked across the floor and eased himself into the sprung seat. Pearson switched on the power, and within the instrument an engine whirled softly.

"Put out the lights," said Henlow and reached forward to adjust the controls of the telescope. He eased the gigantic instrument into position and leaned back in the yielding springs of the seat, his eye fixed to the illuminated eyepiece. His long-fingered hands moved deftly over the line of vernier focusing controls. Satisfied, he emitted a slight gasp and wrinkled his brow in concentration. He remained in this position for several minutes. This giant telescope was a faultless piece of precision engineering. It was situated in a vacuum, above the last trace of air disturbance, through which magnification of a specific object also magnified the foreign matter. Everything on the Moon could be seen crystal clear. He picked out the charted craters, the dark circular plain of Mare Serenitatis, the deepness of Tycho, the ghostly white peaks of the Appenines set against an ebony sky, and Huyghens, the loftiest summit.

On Lunar Base everything was in order—the squat, round-topped buildings, the space-port—a large clearing among the pockmarked pumice surface of jagged rocks and craters. He could even distinguish space-ships at rest, difficult, for it was day on the Moon, and the sunlight sparkled on the white ships on a white surface.

Henlow heaved a heavy sigh and gave up the viewing seat to Adlai. "See what you make of it," he said.

He watched the younger man move lithely into place, saw his efficient fingers slide over the controls with the grace of an accomplished musician on his favourite instrument.

At last, Adlai straightened up, his eyes red-rimmed with concentrative effort. He met Henlow's querying gaze. "Dead," he said. "The whole damned place seems utterly and positively dead."

"That's what I'm afraid of," said Henlow. "I doubt if we'll find anybody alive. Poor devils."

Adlai was on his feet, restless, puzzled. "But what could have done it?" he rapped out.

Henlow stared at him. They read each other's thoughts.

"An attack from Jupiter?" murmured Adlai. His voice quivered a little.

"What else?"

"But how——?"

"That's what we're going to find out," Henlow cut in. He spun round. "Pearson, I want to speak to the ship before I give you any instructions. Can you connect me up?"

The Commander nodded. He lifted the telephone receiver and spoke to his radio control room. "Right, Chief," he said, and handed over the instruments.

"Put Mrs. Thursby on," said Henlow.

Astorola sat before the radio in Sparta's seat. She was conscious of the sudden silence in the pre-flight check of the ship. She could feel the eyes of the crew burning into her back. Then she heard Professor Henlow's voice.

"You remember telling me that from your knowledge of the Jupitan ship which landed on Earth last year, it was possible to reach the Earth without being picked up on a detector?"

Sparta's eyes were wide with incredulity as he flicked the switches for her. He shrugged his shoulders at Ames, who was scratching agitatedly at his right ear. Stevens also registered a blank, fish-like expression at the mention of a Jupitan ship. Lee, the astraphysicist, was louringly thoughtful. They all hung on Astorola's words.

"I do, Professor," she said. She played up to the suggestion of anonymity. "We found that pluronium could be activated by a dakar circuit, which could negativise radar's high frequency waves by induced absorption. Sound waves could be similarly treated."

There was a momentary pause on both sides of the link-up. "Dakar could, in fact, render most forms of electronic machinery ineffective?" said Henlow.

"That is so."

"In your opinion, could dakar be taken one step further to render all forms of power control inoperative?"

"I should think that highly possible."

"Thank you, Mrs. Thursby. That is very helpful. I'm beginning to see daylight now. One other thing, could dakar effect human life? Could it be developed as a lethal weapon?"

"No, that's impossible."

"Helioxide, could that be sprayed in sufficient quantities to gas every living person on the Moon, for instance?"

"I shouldn't think so," said Astorola. She looked puzzled and turned to Brad for reassurance.

He came forward, laid his arm across her shoulder, then spoke into the transmitter. "What's the trouble, Professor? What are you driving at?"

"I have reason to believe that every person on the Moon is dead. I want to discover the cause."

The crew of the *Veno Aegis* shot fearful speculative glances at each other. Lee had moved from a bank of oxygen instruments to see Astorola's face. He was staring at her with eyes filled with fury.

She remained unconscious of his scrutiny, her hands clenched tight in her lap. She nodded to Sparta and he flicked the relay switch. "There is an explanation, Professor Henlow," she said heavily. "The Moon could be struck with active molecular biotoxins. They would kill everything within a few minutes."

"Thank you." Henlow's voice hit back like the impact of a

meteorite. "That's all, Sparta. Prepare ship. Roger."

Henlow turned to Pearson, whose tired eyes were popping. "That seems to solve the mystery," he said. "You heard the explanation. Dakar to cut the power, biotoxins to finish off the survivors."

"Hell, Henlow, what are we up against?"

"We are up against Jupiter, my friend. A race of fiendishly clever creatures, who, if I'm not mistaken, are going to furnish us with many surprises."

Pearson stood aghast. "But—but—who is this woman?"

"Yes, who is she, Chief?" Adlai broke in. His mouth was quivering, his eyes feral black. "I was never aware that a Jupitan ship landed on Earth and was examined by scientists."

Henlow waved him to calm down. "A ship did land," he said. "It escaped all our detector machinery and——"

"That woman came out of it," Adlai cut in. "I saw her stage performance. I knew she was no Earth woman."

"Precisely."

Henlow's confirmation shocked him, even though he had prepared the way for it. "Then you mean she does come from Jupiter?" he gasped.

The older man nodded his grey head. "She's the only person who can throw any immediate light on anything we're likely to encounter. That's why she's with us."

## CHAPTER VII

THE launching from the space-station was a routine operation to which the crew attached little importance. The *Veno Aegis* was put on her course to travel the 220,000 miles to the Moon. Henlow switched on to automatic and joined the crew in their cabin. They were all there except Stevens. Brad and Astorola were in their bunks. Henlow noticed that the bulkhead door had the locking device switched on. The men looked up guiltily as their Chief flicked the switch over the pilot's cabin door. They were gathered round Sparta at the radio. Adlai looked red-faced and flustered, but his jaw was set obstinately, his eyes reflected fire.

"What's going on?" snapped Henlow. "Why are the passengers locked up? Lee and Fairbairn, I told you to keep constant watch on the televistor ports. I want both sides of the ship under constant observation. Why are my orders not being carried out?"

Adlai spoke up. "They've been quizzing me, Chief. Lee's got a bee in his bonnet about the woman."

"Well, Lee?" flashed Henlow, focusing his hard eyes upon him.

The astrophysicist squirmed. "I reckon she's a space-woman."

I don't trust them, any of them."

"Then you'd better change your ideas. Your life depends upon this one, all our lives, in fact. And if any of you get the wrong notions, remember that her safety is my personal regard."

"So she is a space-slut," spat Lee contemptuously.

Henlow's eyes narrowed. Lee saw the danger and held his fury in check. Henlow was more threatening in silence, his eyes spoke volumes. "Yes, she's a Jupitan," he said, at last. "A daughter of the planet which is going to be the most formidable enemy we've ever had."

"Then why don't we——" Lee broke off as Henlow took a measured step towards him. No further movement was necessary.

"Because she's more use to us alive than dead."

"But can we trust her?" Lee persisted.

"I don't know," said Henlow slowly. "I've no reason to doubt her so far. That's no guarantee, however. But one thing is clear, I shall be the judge, the one and only judge. None of you are to touch her without my express orders; have you got that straight?"

Henlow's authority hung over the crew cabin like an un-sheathed dagger. He was absolute master. Seeing their expressions of acknowledgment, he relaxed and grinned. "I also gave some orders about the televistor ports," he said. "Let's have them carried out."

Lee and Fairbairn moved to their positions. Henlow touched them both on the shoulder as they passed. The tension eased. Ship routine settled back to normal.

"If you see anything unusual out there, photograph it and flash it on to the screen," said Henlow. "If it's anything we can't identify we'll consult Astorola."

There was a crackle over the inter-comm. It was Stevens in the power cabin. "If things get too boring we could get her to go through her act, Chief," he said. "I missed it in London."

"So you heard everything, did you?" snapped Henlow.

"Trust me." Stevens let out a rich chuckle. "It's a pity electronic locking devices were invented, I'd have been a dab-hand at listening at keyholes."

"Well, there's no need to repeat my warning."

"None at all, Chief. Besides, I daren't touch her. I'm a married man."

Henlow clicked off with a smile. Stevens could be relied upon to introduce a touch of humour into the most tragic of circumstances. All the crew were grinning as Henlow released the switch on the bulkhead door and went into the troop compartment to talk with Brad and Astorola. Everything was back to normal, the course set for Lunar Base, the ship coasting through space as smooth as syrup.

By the time the *Veno Aegis* came into the low gravity belt of the Moon she was under the impetus of her twelve super-drive

jets. Henlow was in the pilot's cabin, flying on manual, in constant touch with Fairbairn and Ames, the navigator.

"See anything through the viewer, Fairbairn?" he asked.

"Everything lifeless down there, Chief."

"What about the landing apparatus?"

"Looks in order."

"And it's automatic, but we're not going to risk it. We'll go in on a stall and fire landing."

The white mountains of the lunar Apennines rushed up to meet them out of the blackness of space. "Stand by to turn ship, Ames."

The navigator positioned himself at the huge flywheel set in the ship's centre of gravity. "Stand by to turn ship," he put through to Stevens. "Heat box up?"

"Hot as hell," came the sharp reply.

"All set, Fairbairn?" asked Henlow.

"Set, Chief."

Henlow was grim. "A long time since I took a ship in the old-fashioned tail first way," he said, almost to himself. "Be as well to get some practice, though. We'll have to go in this way if we land on Jupiter."

Nobody answered.

"Fire the side-jet, Fairbairn."

Fairbairn tossed the switch operating the jet set between the tail vanes.

"Nose-landing jet! Balance the thrust! Hold it, she's going over! Easy!"

Ames sat with his eyes fixed on his instruments, the flywheel control in his hands. The ship went over. He pressed a lever and the back of his seat slid backwards. The forward jets now took on a braking effect. The ghostly white of the Moon shone through the observation ports. The noise of the jets pounded through the ship. Crew were squashed back into the cushions of their couches. The *Veno Aegis* lurched violently and began to slip sideways.

"The ship's off balance. Stand by for emergency landing. Lee, see to the passengers."

Speed was considerably decreased now. The slipping noticeable in the tilt of the ship. The starboard ports glowed with white, on the port side they were dizzily black.

"Ames, try to get her level. Stevens, what's wrong?"

"Starboard exhaust vent cracked, Chief. The gasses are throwing us to one side."

"Right her, Ames. I'm going in. We're way off course, but I don't want to damage the ship."

The *Veno Aegis* listed heavily. There was so much drift that the auto-pilot couldn't cope with it. Henlow switched off and went over to manual. Without computed data from the landing base he had to rely on his own judgment. In the power cabin

Stevens was in a sweat to increase the pump pressure of the counter-balancing jets. The ship again jolted. The white mountains were looking down on them now. The ship hung perilously on a pillar of fire, then dropped. She lurched over, and there was a crashing sound as the rough rock tore into her underside.

"Into space-suits, all hands," yelled Lee. "We're losing air. I'll see to the passengers, Chief."

Brad shuddered as, space-suited, he stepped out of the ship to feel the white pumice surface of the Moon under his feet. He trod gingerly, expecting the ground to do something extraordinary beneath his feet. The crew were examining the damaged ship. Brad peered into Astorola's space-helmet facepiece. She smiled at him, indicated the ghostliness of the surroundings.

"Is Jupiter anything like this?" he asked, over his radio.

"Not a bit. The Moon is dead. Look at these awful rocks and craters. Jupiter is teeming with life."

"Sounds wonderful," said Brad, without enthusiasm. "But Earth's the place for me."

"Sorry that I came into your office?" she asked pointedly.

He wished that they were not clad in the cumbersome space-suits. He stood before her, light-headed and clumsy-footed. His huge encased hand took hold of the arm of her suit. "No regrets," he whispered.

They were joined by Henlow. "What's the damage, Professor?" asked Brad.

Henlow's voice was sombre. "Worse than I anticipated, I'm afraid."

"Bad as that?"

"The underside of the ship is fractured. She's leaking badly. In an hour there won't be any air left in her at all. In addition, the radio is out of commission. All the valves were broken by the jagged rock tearing into us, all the spares as well."

"How does it affect us?" asked Brad.

"I don't quite know," said Henlow. "It might be serious. Our space-suit oxygen will last for ten hours. We're fifty miles from Lunar Base. Our only hope is to get there, and to do that we'll have to walk. It's not going to be easy, and I don't know if there will be any oxygen when we do reach the base. How the Jupitan attack has affected the base equipment we won't know until we get there."

"But the space-station. Did you say that you had the nose painted so that they could pick out the ship on the telescope?"

"They can't do anything in the time available. For the next ten hours we're completely on our own."

Henlow called the rest of the crew. "It's no use hanging around here," he said. "The sooner we get moving the better."

"Any plan, Chief?" asked Adlai.

"Yes, we'll travel in three groups. Adlai, you go on ahead

with Fairbairn and Ames. You're the youngest and will be able to travel fastest. If you should get there ahead of us, do everything to get the oxygen apparatus functioning. Sparta, Lee and Stevens, you keep together. I'll follow up in the rear with the two passengers. Any questions?"

"When do we start?" said Stevens, chuckling.

Again he eased the tension.

"Straight away," said Henlow. "Adlai, take the gas detector with you. There's no reading here, but we might run into a biotoxin area as we get nearer. Fire the signal gun if you get a reading. And if you get to the base a good way in front of us, watch your step. Go in with jixtas at the ready, and don't relax precautions because nothing happens at first. Act as if there are Jupitans hidden round every corner, if you see any, shoot to kill." As he said this Henlow watched Astorola closely. It was difficult to observe her reaction in a space-suit, but she gave no audible sign of qualms.

The strange contingent moved off across the vast luminous stillness. Nothing else stirred but them. The prominent sun shone down from the surrounding blackness, mocking in its security.

The advance trio got going at a cracking pace. Brad stumbled clumsily.

"Do you mean to say that I've got to walk fifty miles in this contraption?" he complained. "I'll never make it."

"You'll soon get used to it," said Henlow.

"Not in a million years."

"There is one alternative. You can stay here and die," said Henlow grimly.

"Pleasant chap, isn't he?" said Brad to Astorola.

"Save your breath," she said. "You're going to need it."

Brad reflected on the wisdom of this remark and trudged on in silence. The sight of the penal colony sickened him. In the mining catacombs long rows of bodies hung limp where they had died at their work. Satisfied that the atmosphere was now free from biotoxin gases, Henlow pushed on without investigating thoroughly. But the inert bodies everywhere were inescapable.

"We've got to go on," snapped Henlow, as Brad stumbled and sunk to his knees in the white powder of the surface. A slight puff of dust rose round him, but it quickly settled, for there was no wind to disturb it.

"I'm all-in," gasped Brad.

"You can't be, Thursby. Pass out here and you die. It's as simple as that."

Brad found the energy to stumble on.

Adlai and his companions reached the Lunar Base with more than an hour's supply of oxygen left. They fanned out across the space-port, keeping in constant radio touch with each other. Everything was in normal order, except for the ubiquitous presence

of dead bodies. The molecular biotoxins had penetrated the space-suits of the Lunar I.V.B. men. The corpses were already rotting: it was a dreadful sight. The Moon in its use as a penal settlement had long been associated with death, but here was death standing out with unrelieved intensity, littered among the marks of human progress.

Adlai's voice was a hushed whisper as he said, "Converge on the main building."

The three men moved forward with watchful slowness, their weapons in their hands, their eyes large and searching. The utter stillness of everything engulfed them. Fairbairn reached the Zenith space-ship resting on landing ramps. He started to examine her, but Adlai called him. "No time for that now. They're all dead; we've got to take care of the living."

Fairbairn hesitated, then with a final glance at his friend's silent ship walked on, completing the arc of survey with Adlai and Ames. They closed in towards each other, nearing the main entrance shaft of the I.V.B. headquarters. When they reached it they pulled up. There was a long pause as they stood in silence and stared.

"Poor devils," murmured Adlai, at last. In front of him was a pile of dead bodies within ten yards of the main shaft. "They must have rushed out of the building right into the arms of death."

Ames picked his way between the bodies. "That might be nothing to what we find inside. Come on, let's get in."

They went together, keeping closer now, continually glancing around. The darkness of the entrance tunnel added to their consternation. They reached the main airlock door.

"It's closed," said Fairbairn. "How do we get in?"

"There's a manual control somewhere," said Adlai. "We'll have to use that."

"We could do with a light," put in Ames.

"We won't get any lights. The Chief reckons the power has been cut."

"I'm going to try, anyway. There used to be a switch around here somewhere."

"All right, try it. Can't do no harm."

They jumped in unison as Ames, after fumbling in the dark, flicked a switch and they were flooded by the light of an overhead arc light. "There you are," he said triumphantly. "Nothing wrong with the power there."

But the huge, black outer steel door of the airlock loomed before them with forbidding portent. Fairbairn was the first to find voice. "If the lights work there's no reason why the airlock mechanism shouldn't." He took a step forward and thumbed the outer door release catch. The door hissed open invitingly.

Adlai peered inside the equalising chamber. "There doesn't seem anything wrong."

Fairbairn joined him. They stepped into the chamber. "Ames, you wait outside," said Adlai. "It's no good the three of us walking into a trap. If the power's on it seems to suggest that somebody is here."

The two men watched the outer doors cut them off from their comrade. Fairbairn manipulated the internal controls. When a final door opened and brought light into the blackness of the airlock they stood together, afraid, fearing that the next step would take them into something alien and unknown. The silence was particularly frightening, for they both associated the large reception hall with the noise and bustle of incoming and outgoing space-crews. They took a step forward, moving as if joined together, their jixtas prominent.

The reception hall led off four ways into wide corridors each with many doors opening from them. Adlai glanced up at the dials over the inner airlock door. "There's air in here," he said. "I'd feel better with this suit off. Shall we risk it?"

"I'll go back and fetch Ames first," said Fairbairn. "Then we can go through the place together."

Adlai remained motionless, all his senses keenly alert. He heard the door whirr open. He moved to get his back to a wall, eyes blazing at every corner and object capable of concealing a person. Persons there were, nearly a score of them, but like those outside, all stiffly lifeless. The only difference being that they were not wearing space-suits.

It seemed an age before his crewmates reappeared, but Adlai was made of stern stuff. During fifteen years of regular interplanetary travel he had been in many tight corners. He accepted this as the worst, and was prepared to admit that he was scared. He also knew that he had to keep his nerve. The Chief's life might well depend upon him.

He went forward to greet Ames and Fairbairn. "Seen anything?"

"No."

"Fairbairn, keep us covered while we get these suits off. I've got a yearning to have my limbs free."

They covered each other until the suits were off, then moved forward inch by inch. Adlai stood in the centre of the reception hall.

"There's four corridors and three of us. What do we do?" asked Ames.

Adlai grinned, a nervous twitch tugging at the side of his mouth. "We'll stick together until we get some oxygen. The store-room is at the end of the centre corridor. Let's see if we can get hold of some space-suit cylinders."

They moved off. Adlai first, Fairbairn in the centre, moving sideways. Ames followed behind, walking backwards. They kept alongside a wall and thus covered the three sides of approach. In every room they looked they found dead bodies. No signs of

any disturbance, nothing out of place, but the whole building reeked of death.

At last they came to the store-room. Everything they needed was there. All in smooth-working order—equipment, machinery, radio and telephone. There seemed no reason for the wholesale death. They took three oxygen cylinders from the racks and tested their content on the pressure machine.

"One of us has got to get back to the Chief with these," said Adlai. "Who's it going to be?"

They looked at each inquiringly. "You're in command, Adlai," said Fairbairn. "You give the order."

"Do you feel fit enough?" said Adlai. "Ames won't make it. I'll go, if you like. But I'd sooner stick here and have a look round. We're not out of trouble yet."

"I'll go, then," said Fairbairn.

## CHAPTER VIII

**A** THOROUGH and intensive search and survey of the Lunar Base revealed nothing to explain the mass death of its staff. All machinery was found to be in perfect working order, and there was no evidence that it had ever been out of commission. It followed from logical reasoning, however, that the complete power plant of the base must have been cut off for a period long enough to kill all who had remained at their posts. Henlow called a council of war in one of the lofty briefing rooms.

The crew of the *Veno Aegis* and the two passengers sat at small tables while Henlow stood on a small platform with an illuminated map of the solar system sparking behind him. "I'm quite satisfied that we in this room are the only living creatures on the base," he said. "We've searched every possible hiding place and found nobody. In addition, and what is probably more convincing, Astorola is prepared to swear that there are no Jupitans here. The holocaust we've found is an indication of what we are likely to encounter. We've got to get to the bottom of it so that we can prepare ourselves for another possible attack. Has anybody any ideas?"

The crew glanced at each other, their faces puzzled. They wagged their heads and gesticulated hopelessly with their hands, then Lee fixed his eyes on Astorola. The others followed his gaze, realising their own inadequacy in solving the problems. Astorola became the centre of attention, but the eyes upon her were no longer hostile. They were beginning to understand why Henlow had brought her, and her willingness to help, together with her cheerful acceptance of adversity, had won their regard.

"Well, Astorola, it looks as if it's up to you," said Henlow.

She looked around at the eager faces of the men. "The whole

Lunar Base must have been paralysed by dakar circuits," she said.

Sparta put in an immediate question. "What is a dakar circuit?" he asked.

She glanced at his ginger eyebrows knit together in thought. "I don't know exactly," she replied. "They've obviously been extended in their purpose during the past few months. I can only tell you what I know of them."

"Go on."

"They were used on the Earth-going burolovane to nullify the probing waves of detector apparatus generated by mechanical power. Dakar is an induced hyper-magnetic relay activated by a polar force, which is capable of magnetizing machinery to such strength that the parts are seized by the influence and halted."

Sparta sat gasping. "Then like a temporary magnetization, the influence wears off and they will function again. That would explain our finding everything in working order."

Astorola nodded.

Lee cut in with a flourish of his hand. "It would also explain the asphyxiation deaths. The oxygen supply mechanism was cut off, also the vacuum insulating device. In fact, the men inside the building were plunged into the Moon's airless vacuum without any warning. Airlocks and every other form of sealing mechanism were inoperative. Some of them must have grabbed their space-suits and rushed out of the building. Those were the poor devils we saw piled up outside. The others, seeing what happened to their comrades, stayed inside. It was a choice of death through lack of air or biotoxin poisoning."

"The swine," hissed Adlai. "But it all adds up, Chief."

Henlow's eyes burned in the suppression of his fury. His face was ashen-grey as he gripped at the table until the skin between his knuckles gleamed shiny white. "Yes, it all adds up," he said. "And it could happen again, at any moment."

"Then what are you going to do?" Brad's voice was edged with panic.

"We'll take every precaution possible. At least, we do know what can happen, it won't take us by surprise if the power is cut. Nobody is to leave the building unless under my orders. Even inside you will have an A-Z space-suit at hand to put on at a moment's notice. Carry them about with you, if necessary. Keep your eyes on all oxygen content dials wherever you go. If any instrument needles begin to flicker, get into your suit at once. Is that clear?"

They acknowledged him grimly.

"Sparta, there's a squadron of pursuit ships taken off from Terra, isn't there?"

The radio man forced a smile. "Took off an hour ago, Chief. And all fixed with long-range jixta blast guns."

"Good. And the orbital ship from the space-station is also on its way?"

"Due in four hours, Chief."

"Then we want that above us as soon as it can be made ready, Stevens. You'll be available to assist the crew. Fairbairn, you'll go up in that ship and take command. Radio us the moment you sight anything suspect. Sparta, get back to the radio room. Tell Orbit ship she can use the landing mechanism. Get her in first, then prepare to receive the maintenance squadron and the pursuit ships. The maintenance men have got nothing to put in order, but there's plenty of work to be done if we're going to make this place tenable. Astorola, I want a word with you about this dakar. I've got an idea that there's something we can do to make that circuit bounce back. Adlai, you come with us. Thursby, I'm putting you in charge of the canteen. Go and get the food sorted out. I wanted everything tested before it's eaten. We don't know what effect this stagnation period has had on the rations. Lee, you put him wise, then attend to the oxygen apparatus. And don't forget all of you, don't venture out of reach of an A-Z suit. We've got no precaution against another attack until the orbital ship is in position and the pursuit ships arrive."

The gathering broke up and went about their allocated tasks with an air of determined resolution. Brad also fell in line uncomplainingly, content to leave his destiny in Henlow's capable control.

After its period of silent death the Lunar Base once again began to stir with the motion of human industry. The dead were respectfully buried in a communal grave on a stretch of white plateau on the western side of Mare Serenitatis. By the time lunar night had fallen an orbital observation ship fitted with high-powered telescopic viewers, cameras, sound and radar detectors was describing a regular orbit above the Moon's gravity belt. On the space-port thirty Super Vilos pursuit ships stood ready for immediate launching. The I.V.B. headquarters throughout the long lunar night was being insulated by a sealing compound of uridanium which Henlow, with Astorola's co-operation, had developed in the laboratory. Hundreds of space-suited men working in three unceasing shifts laboured under the brilliant lights of the arc lamps, racing against time, ever listening over the general address system for the warning which would send them scampering inside the building. Several practice warnings had been sounded and every man knew exactly what to do in the event of an emergency.

On Earth a huge force of space-ships was being massed for the Jupitan invasion. Manned by the crews of the I.V.B. and B.S.E. they were equipped with the most modern scientific weapons and instruments. Henlow kept them on Earth in case the Jupitans attacked before the Lunar Base fortifications were completed.

All through the lunar night everybody remained at a split-second's readiness. Nothing happened. A feeling of false security crept into the men's attitude. Henlow stamped it out by sounding continual alarms. He allowed no precaution to be relaxed. As punishment to several sceptical maintenance workers he re-established the penal colony. He ruled Lunar Base with autocratic determination, and in this he was guided by Astorola, who was constantly warning him against indifference. She knew the fanaticism of her own people.

Light once again crept over the Moon's ghostly whiteness, illuminating rugged barren expanses. The arc lamps were extinguished and work carried on in the welcome warmth. Henlow was out inspecting the uridium insulation when the alarm sounded. Men toppled from the scaffolding struts round the building in what at first seemed disorderly chaos, but which developed into a well-practiced mass evacuation of the working area.

Henlow went into the building through a special airlock which admitted him to a room fitted with independent radio and telephone apparatus. He snatched for the telephone and got straight through to Sparta. "What is it?" he snapped.

Sparta's voice rang with urgency. "Fairbairn, Chief. He's sighted a strange ship."

"Right, three Vilos ships to launch at once. Relay the crews. I'll take one myself. Tell Masters to stand down. Get Astorola to stand by the transmitter with you. Adlai, takes charge down here."

There was a sharp click and Henlow went through the airlock again and made for the launching ground. Inside the Vilos ship he tore off his space-suit, ordering the crew to stand by for emergency take-off. In the pilot's cabin he got on his couch, rapped out his orders, flashed his eyes over the control panel, gave further orders to the two other ship commanders, flicked the switches and pressed the firing button.

The sleek Vilos ship plunged out into the space blackness. Henlow cut the jets and coasted. "Vilos One to Orbit ship. Henlow speaking. Come in. Over."

"She's approaching, Chief. Coming out of the sun and spinning. Not under power."

"Give me an accurate bearing."

As he listened Henlow bent forward over the switches, peering out into the abyss of space. The sun was a flaming ball of fire. He switched an anti-glare shield over the observation panel and picked out the whirling silver speck.

"Vilos One to Vilos Two and Three. Keep me in viewer range. Don't close in unless I get in difficulties. Over."

The two commanders answered.

"Fairbairn, keep me hooked up. I'm going after her."

"Listening out."

The pursuit ship crew received their orders and Vilos 1 vibrated

with the sudden impetus of accelerative power.

"She's spotted me and under power now. Travelling much faster. Hell, she's going away from the sun into the direction of Terra's orbit. Fairbairn, contact Lunar to warn all Earth bases."

Henlow's eyes narrowed on the silver speck. "Navigator, keep your telescopic viewer on her. Let me know if she changes course. What is she, can you see?"

"A flat craft, Chief. I've never seen anything like her."

Henlow grunted.

"She's changing course now, Chief."

Even through his own panel he could see the tremendous burst of speed as the enemy ship swung in an arc which covered thousands of miles.

"She's steady now. At the edge of the constellation to starboard."

Henlow had decreased the power. He swung the ship outwards, piling on speed as switch after switch went over and his seat slid further back. Breathing was almost intolerable. He cut the speed again to relieve the crew's constricted lungs and raised himself to a sitting position.

"It's slowing down, we're gaining on it." The tight-lipped navigator had his eye fixed to the prismatic eyepiece of the telescope.

"Larkins, come and take over. I'm going on the jixta."

A shock-headed young man moved into Henlow's place, grinned and peered through the observation panel. "Doesn't look much, does she, Chief?" he said.

Henlow snapped him to silence. "You concentrate on your job and listen to everything I say."

Larkins settled back subdued.

"She's much larger than us," said Henlow grimly. "And we're flying on an identical course behind her. Ease off the power a little and take her ten points to starboard. I don't want to get caught up in her gravity mass."

Larkins tried to make the adjustment. His face reddened. "She won't go, Chief," he blurted out.

"What? Simpson, check our position with the enemy ship."

"She's swinging earthwards again. Ten degrees—fifteen—twenty—twenty-five. She's steady now." He gasped. "We've swung 25 degrees as well. She's going to port. Hell, so are we!"

Henlow's lips flickered momentarily. "She's got us caught on some attraction beam," he murmured. "That's why she keeps changing course, to test its effect. Switch on the uridanium circuit, Larkins. Then try to alter course."

The heat from the sun was increasing. The young space-pilot was drenched in perspiration, but his hands were still

steady. "She's moving away." He switched on another row of jet switches. The Vilos 1 fell away in a drooping arc. "We've got away, Chief."

Henlow smiled to himself. "Now we'll go in closer and get her. Once you settle on her again keep her there. Simpson, give us each change of direction of the enemy. Larkins, make the same change every time. Let her think that in closer range she's got us snared up again, it might prevent them firing at us. They probably want one of our ships if they can get it."

Larkins was silent, aware of the importance of his task.

"All right, go in at full power, then cut all jets. I want every ounce of power behind the blaster. Engineer, get the plant up to maximum heat. Put in another power brick if it's needed. All set, Larkins."

Larkins gasped assent into his microphone.

The ship sped across the void of space until the blackness engulfed it. The crew were flattened back against the springs of their couches, their faces stretched out as if made of elastic. Such velocity could not be maintained and Larkins gradually reduced his jets. Henlow was immediately up at his viewer, the blaster controls hot to his itching fingers. He knew that he had to get his shot in quick. It had to be accurate. There might not be time for the second chance. He had no idea what the enemy ship could let loose at him, but he never underestimated an enemy. The Jupitans had proved themselves highly competent so far.

He matched the distance shown on the range-finder with the speck on the telephoto screen in front of him. His hands scrabbled at the sight controls, but every movement was prompted by his quick-thinking brain, in spite of the impression of flurry. "Cut all power on the jets," he rapped. "Maximum heat, power cabin—NOW!"

He pressed the firing button. The recoil was so terrific that it sent him reeling backwards. The Vilos 1 was dropping through space, out of control. He heard Larkins yelling to the navigator at the centre of gravity wheel, trying to balance the braking tail jets against the side stabilisers. Henlow scrambled to his feet with difficulty. There was a sudden jolt and he was tossed backwards again.

Larkins burst in with the power, watching his velocimeter and pressure gauges as his hands hovered over the switch panels. Henlow lay back in a daze, collected air back into his bruised body and laboured to his feet as the ship assumed normal flight.

"Orbit ship to Vilos One. You got her, Chief! Knocked her to hell!"

"Vilos Two to Vilos One. A direct hit, Chief! I followed over you to get photographs. She broke up into a million pieces."

Henlow answered back in a weary voice. "Vilos One to Vilos

Two. Thank you. Good work. Return to Lunar with Vilos Three. Roger."

"Are you all right, Chief?" The query came from Fairbairn.

"Yes, we've righted ship. Returning to base. Roger."

He glanced at Larkins, who was drenched in perspiration, his fair hair hanging in lank tufts across his brow. A grin broke through the anxiety written on his face. He wiped his bare arm across his forehead. "We did it, Chief," he said.

Henlow smiled. He suddenly felt very tired. "You did a good job, Larkins," he said encouragingly. "I was proud to have you on the ship."

This was praise, indeed. Larkins puffed out his chest and grinned like an excited schoolboy. Like many other young men he had grown up with the legend of Professor Henlow's space exploits.

"Put her on to course, then switch over to automatic and take a breather. I'll leave you to take her into base." Henlow went and lay on his bunk. He felt aware of age creeping up on him. For more than thirty years he had been making international news with his adventures in space. He was probably the best known Earth man in the whole of the system. He was looked upon as a guardian of Earth's invincibility and feared on every planet upon which Earth men had trod. He sighed heavily, realising that he was getting past the strain of space-combat. Before he closed his eyes he glanced at the jubilant feature of Larkins. He smiled to himself, content that he had trained men who would keep up his own high standards. But before he gave up adventuring in space there was Jupiter to be dealt with. He was asleep before he could probe his mind further.

An hour after Vilos 1 landed another emergency warning came through. "What's wrong now?" asked Henlow, linking up with Sparta.

"There's a formation of Jupitan craft on the way. Fairbairn reckons about 25 to 30 of them."

"Order complete pursuit ship take-off." Henlow turned to Adlai. "Hear that? This looks like a test of strength. We've got to put up a good show against them to delay their making a mass attack on Lunar Base. How many Vilos ships have we got?"

"Twelve at instant readiness. Twenty in reserve, including the three that have just come in. You ought to take it easy, Chief. You've only just come down. Let me lead the pursuit ships, it's no use cracking yourself up before the big day comes."

A dark reflective frown wrinkled Henlow's brow. "Perhaps you're right," he said. "I want to get on to Terra and arrange for the launching of the invasion force. You lead the first twelve ships, Adlai. I'll send another twelve up straight after you. I'll come up with the rest if it's necessary. Now listen, get the jixta blaster guns on them as soon as you can. Their ships are

fitted with an attraction device. You know, the sort of thing used for bringing in crooked space-ships, only much more powerful, something to do with dakar, I expect. Anyway, the uridanium is proof against it, but don't let them know that. The other one didn't get back to tell any tales, but it might have radioed or telepathized the information. They can't know that we've got tail-firing blasters, however, so keep firing forward unless you've got to spring a surprise. If you get in any trouble radio for the rest of the ships. Remember, if we succeed in striking a decisive blow on this lot, we'll be in an excellent position to launch the invasion."

"I'll do my best," said Adlai earnestly.

"I know you will. Good luck! I'll come out to the launching apron with you. You'd better take Vilos Ten."

They hastily pulled on their space-suits and went through the airlock.

On the launching site the hustle of getting twenty-four ships off was in full swing. Adlai went straight to his sleek-bodied ship, gleaming white in the sunlight. Henlow went to the crew-room. Larkins rushed up to him.

"Are you going up again, Chief?" he asked.

"Not yet."

"What about Vilos One?"

Henlow grinned, understanding the young man's eagerness. "You can command her yourself this time," he said.

Larkins whooped with delight, then remembering himself, saluted smartly and rushed off to collect his crew.

The twenty-four ships were soon ready, and the ground crews retreated behind protective barriers. One by one the pursuit ships shot upwards on the tip of a brilliant pillar of flame. Soon they were all off. Henlow went back to the headquarters to join Sparta in the radio room.

It took him over an hour to go through the launching plans with Mara Yates at I.V.B., London, then have a talk with General Armitage of the B.S.E. They set the time for the take-off of the 500 multi-purpose ships to be used as the advanced striking force against Jupiter. "Well, that's fixed up," said Henlow, turning to Sparta. "We'll use every type of ship we've got—pursuit, bombers, pick-a-backs, troop carriers, torpedo carriers, fire ships, the lot. We'll get reinforcements of the types that make out best. Now, how are things going up there?"

"There's been no conflict yet, Chief."

"Good, put me through to Fairbairn."

But Fairbairn came through without being called. "Orbit ship calling Lunar Base. Emergency. Calling Lunar. Emergency. Come in, Lunar."

Henlow snatched for the microphone. "Henlow speaking. Come in, Fairbairn."

"It's bad, Chief. The enemy ships are keeping in tight forma-

tion. They opened up with heat beams at incredible range. Adlai wasn't prepared for it. Nearly half the ships were eaten up, disintegrated before they knew what was happening."

Henlow flicked the relay switch. "Is Adlai still there?"

"He is, Chief. Trying to muster his shocked forces."

"Tell him to split them up to operate individually."

"He's already done that."

"Right. Roger." He glanced at Sparta, his eyes narrowed and grim. "Hook me up with Adlai in Vilos Ten. I'll warn the crews for the next take-off. He walked across to the address system microphone, gave his orders in a harsh voice which indicated his anxiety.

"Adlai on the hook up, Chief."

Henlow moved swiftly. "Come in, Adlai. What's the position?"

"We've lost eleven ships." The self-reproach in his voice was clearly detected. "I'm sorry, Chief. I just didn't think that any beam or projectile could operate at that range."

"Of course, you didn't," said Henlow reassuringly. "What was the range?"

"Nearly 10,000 miles."

Henlow's lips trembled. "Ten thousand miles?" he repeated. "It's incredible. You can't be blamed, Adlai. Don't let this loss get you down. You had to go in as close as 5,000 miles to bring our own blasters into range."

"Yes, but——"

"But nothing," snapped Henlow. "You've got a task to carry out. Weeping over your losses won't help."

"You saw Larkins before he launched in command of his own ship. He came through to me yelling with jubilation."

"Well?"

"He was in one of the burnt out ships."

Henlow swallowed hard. The picture of young Larkins' face flashed across his mind. There was a momentary flutter in the pit of his stomach, but he steeled himself against it. "If I'd have taken off I would have been in Vilos One, which means you would now be in sole command of Lunar Base and this operation. I hope you would be behaving with less sickly sentiment."

Adlai didn't answer.

"Are all the enemy ships still in formation?"

"Yes, they haven't budged an inch. They're coming on as if chained together."

"Perhaps they've got some formation device? Have they fired at any of you since the first burst?"

"Yes, we've seen several more bursts of white light coming from them. We're out of range at 14,000 miles."

"Right, well keep out of range. I'm bringing up the other ships on super-drive. I've got an idea that if we crack that formation we'll stand a chance of singling some of them out. On no account let anybody fire a tail gun."

"We'll be watching out for you."

"Keep out of range, but keep them in sight. Let them see that we haven't given up the challenge. Roger."

Henlow rushed out of the airlock and was driven in an atomic tractor blister to his waiting pursuit ship.

## CHAPTER IX

ONCE again the Lunar Base thundered with the noise of ships launching at minute intervals. Henlow went first hurtling out into space in a blaze of power, all the ship's jets screaming at full pressure, and the normal maximum speed increased by the super-drive booster. Henlow maintained the speed for as long as human life could bear it, then when his body felt that it would be crushed by the merest spark of increased velocity, he gradually eased off. The sustained effort had been worthwhile, however, for when he was able to sit up he was rewarded by the sight of two friendly white specks coasting against the blackness of infinite space.

"Vilos Leader calling Vilos Ten. Am up with you. Any more developments? Over."

A trace of a sigh of relief tinged Adlai's return. "Nothing, Chief. I've got the rest of the ships all round the formation."

"We've got to stop them coming on," said Henlow. "They're getting too near to base for safety's sake. The buildings are now protected against their dakar apparatus, but if they spray biotoxins again the space-port will be knocked out for long enough to make our return impossible."

"I know," said Adlai. "Now that you're here, Chief, I've got a plan. I've been thinking over what you said about breaking the formation and the tail-firing gun. They seem to have a 360 degree arc of fire in formation, but if they were scattered I'm sure they wouldn't be so effective. Their protection seems to be in their being linked together, and there's something unnatural about the precision of their formation."

"It's mechanical, I'm sure of it," Henlow came in.

"I reckon bursting them up would play havoc with their plans. But we can't get into range with the jixta blasters without getting burned to a cinder."

"What have you got in mind, Adlai?"

"I'll get above them, Chief. Out of range at first. They're bound to open up with their heat beams. I'll turn the ship over and go down tail first, as if out of control. They'll possibly think they've got me. I'll go down to one side of them so that they can see I'll miss the formation, then when I'm in range I'll open up with the blaster and give them everything I've got. It's a risk, Chief. But it's the only way I can see."

There was a momentary pause. Henlow's brows knitted to-

gether in serious thought. Adlai had more or less outlined the plan he had in mind. "It's practically certain suicide," he said, with a catch in his voice. "If it's going to be done, I'll do it."

"No, Chief. I let the Brigade down on the first count. We lost eleven ships because I kept them in formation too long."

"That wasn't your fault. You couldn't be expected to know the incredible range of their armament."

"But we lost eleven ships, Chief. That's forty-four men. I've been on to my crew and they're all with me. I've told them what this could mean to Terra. I mean to do it, Chief. I want your sanction if I can get it. If not, well, I'm going, anyway. Every second we argue they're coming nearer. Listening out. Over."

Henlow sucked at his teeth, then with a heavy, tired voice, he said, "All right, Adlai. But for heaven's sake be careful."

Adlai smiled. "I'll break up that formation if I die in the attempt."

And that was exactly what he would do, thought Henlow. He sighed and switched over to the ships in circuit. He knew now that if it was humanly possible the formation would be broken, but he didn't reckon on seeing Adlai alive again. Larkins had gone. Now Adlai was going. Henlow purged his mind of sentimental thought and prepared his forces for action when the formation broke.

Adlai also spent a few febrile seconds instructing the other three members of his crew. Stevens was his engineer, Ames the navigator and radio operator, and a red-headed youngster named Dorrel, the co-pilot and electronics man. Adlai briefly outlined the plan, then with his eyes fixed to the velocimeter in the overhead panel, snapped the switches which sent the ship into a wide upward arc. Stevens kept the telescopic viewer focused on the enemy formation all the time. Adlai had a constant picture of them on a screen above him.

Stevens kept chanting their range, his voice strangely guttural with the effect of the accelerative pressure. "Fourteen thousand miles at ninety degrees—seventeen thousand at forty five degrees—"

Adlai cut his side jets to check the speed of the kinetic curve. "Stand by for the tip-over," he said. There was plenty of time yet, but he wanted everything ready.

"On the flywheel, skipper," came Dorrell's voice.

"Directly above them now," Ames informed him.

Adlai's hands flashed over his switches, balancing side-jets against tail-jets to execute a tight turn. The velocimeter had dropped now, but the guages were well up. "Keep the pumps up to maximum, Steve. We're going to need every ounce of power to pull away from that lot."

"We're flying a parallel course 20,000 miles above them," said Ames.

"Right. I'm going down now. We'll turn over at 14,000. Watch for the heat beams, Steve. The moment you see them

open up let me know. The real fun will start then. Make sure you're strapped to your gun sights. This will be the roughest trip you've ever had."

"The space-pilot that can put the wind up me hasn't been born yet," chuckled Stevens, from his tail cabin.

Adlai grinned, but his eyes were constantly on his instruments. He knew that the lives of three other men depended on the split-second timing of his movements. He set a tilting course converging on the enemy formation and found it easy to match their velocity, a fact which increased his belief in the theory that the ships were in some way dependent upon each other. At 14,000 miles above the formation he levelled out.

"I'm going over now, Chief. Then straight down as they turn on the heat. Keep your fingers crossed," he called to Henlow.

"Good luck!" It was all Henlow could manage. Fatigue and anxiety coiled in a hard knot within him.

Fairbairn also broke in from the orbit ship. "Good luck, Adlai, wish I was with you!"

"The heat beams are on, Skip!" yelled Stevens. "It's spitting out of those ships like test fuel into a jet splash pit."

"Ames, check the range on the computer."

"Thirteen-thousand."

"Over we go then."

For a moment Vilos 10 seemed to hang in space, then as Adlai kept the braking jets damped down she began to fall. "This is it," he yelled. The thundering subsonics of the live jets rattled through the ship as if their very noise would tear her apart.

Adlai's hands were busy at his floor panel of switches. His eyes flashed over the instruments—velocimeter, power generator, fuel pump pressures; injector valves opened and shut with alternate switching, screamed their objection as the instrument needles danced as if bedevilled. The lateral and longitudinal inclinometer gauges were similarly berserk as one jet was switched against the next, cut and turned on again. The sleek pursuit ship swayed dizzily downwards, jerking like a dice being rattled in a box.

"The beams are off," cried Stevens.

"11,000 . . . 10,000 . . . We're in beam range now."

"Good-bye to Terra if they switch on again," said Stevens.

Adlai smiled wryly. His eyes were pinpointed black as he watched the enemy ships increase in size on the screen. His hands flew over the switches, increasing the downward speed, intensifying the lurching until he felt the ship would crack open.

"7,000 . . . 6,500 . . . 6,000 . . ."

"Get ready to fire, Steve."

"Ready, Skip." Stevens was strapped down against the gun, the firing button in one hand, the other on the sight control. His blue eyes were agleam with suspense, his teeth gritted.

"5,500 . . . 5,000 . . ."

"Fire when you're sighted. I'm swinging over . . . NOW!"

The ship was a cauldron of screeching subsonic noises. Adlai switched on the braking jets, tried to balance them with the side jets. The whole craft trembled. The recoil of the gun seemed to be squeezing her like a concertina.

"Right in amongst them!" cried Stevens, in jubilation. "I've unloaded all we've got."

"They're split up!" yelled Dorrell. "They're floundering!"

Adlai flashed a glance at the screen. But his attention was soon diverted. One of the fuel pump gauges flickered, then tottered slowly back to zero. He couldn't pull out now with a stabilising jet gone.

"A valve's gone in No. 5 pump," spluttered Stevens.

"Hold on, we've got to keep on going down. We'll go right through them."

They went down with a 15-g field flattening them to their couches. Adlai abandoned the switches and watched the screen. He couldn't do anything safely until he had escaped out of heat beam range. The beams were flashing in all directions, but the enemy were in chaos. He saw two of them knocked out by their own beams. He'd have to leave the Chief to do the mopping up. It looked as if it would be comparatively easy. The 360 degree arc of fire definitely depended on keeping in formation.

The velocimeter was climbing upwards as Vilos 10 hurtled towards Earth's orbit. Adlai knew that he had to stop the downward plunge. The screen was now filled with the blackness of space, star constellations flashing by in a panorama of flickerless light. "Standby the flywheel, Dorrell," he shouted.

Speech was almost impossible, but he got an acknowledgement back.

He flicked on all tail jets, then thrust with the forwards. The ship trembled indecisively. "I'm going to fire the forward gun. Try and right her on the recoil."

Adlai pressed the firing button. The ship seemed to turn a complete somersault, but in reality only lurched to port.

"Try again. Get her over on the port beam, if possible, the power's all right that side."

He stabbed at the button again. Another lurch, the ship was going down at an angle of 45 degrees. The gyros were hysterical in their objection.

"We should do it next time."

"Let's hope so. There won't be a next time after that," called Stevens.

"What's that?"

"We've been eating up power like a monkey at a bag of nuts. The power bar in the matrix is nearly burned out, and at this speed I can't move to replace it."

"Hear that, Dorrell? It's now or never. I'll fire the lot."

Adlai pressed the button at one second intervals. The ship swayed in a frenzy. He juggled with the switches, the flat of his left hand hard on the port bank. "We've got her," he breathed, at last. "Good work, Dorrell. I'll steady her on level course as soon as I can, then we'll coast for a while and get back to normal. Steve, get another bar in when you can move."

"Let anything try to stop me. Nice work, Skip. I thought that was curtains."

"We've still got to land on Lunar with a powerless side jet," Adlai reminded him.

"You could do it with your hands tied."

"All right, I'll try it that way."

"No . . . no, Skip. I was . . . I . . ."

Adlai laughed out loud. The danger was over. He manœuvred the ship, switched in the automatic and lay back to relax his aching body.

Several minutes later he heard Henlow's voice. "Vilos leader to Vilos 10. Are you receiving me? Over."

"Vilos 10 answering. Receiving you, Chief. Over."

The sigh over the transmitter was clearly audible. "Thank heavens, I've called you a dozen times!"

"We've probably been out of range. We've been on a bit of a joyride."

"Can you return to base?"

"On our way now. How's things with you? Over."

"Better than my wildest hopes. We've knocked out 15 of them, four got caught in the beams of their own ships and Fairbairn reckons five got away."

"Did you pursue them?"

"No, I think it will be a good thing to let them go back to Jupiter and tell their story."

"I get it."

"Right, we'll get back to base. We've really got something to plan now. Roger."

Adlai grinned, reckoning that the next time he launched it would be for a visit to Jupiter.

## CHAPTER X

IT took more than four hours for all the ships of the Invasion Task Force to launch from the Moon's orbit and assemble in striking formations. Astorola was with Henlow in the control ship and Brad had received instruction on how to take over the firing of a blaster. The ships formed in small groups, bound for Lamcurada, which according to Astorola, was the centre of government from which Kaunchadi ruled the Jupitan people.

The sleek pursuit ships were everywhere, ringing the craft

they were escorting. All crews were at the alert, observers with their detector instruments at every viewing port. The *Veno Aegis* travelled above the main formation so that she could command a point of vantage from which to watch all the ramifications of the action. Apart from Adlai, the crew was the same as had taken off from Earth to make the original investigation. Even Fairbairn had been brought down from the orbit ship and an older man installed in his place. Adlai commanded the advance pursuit ship squadron. The *Veno Aegis* also carried a selected party of tough I.V.B. troops, who would be ready for the Jupitan landing if the operation went as planned.

Hour after hour of tension followed, it developed into day after day, then into weeks. This was a journey of exploration in which the hazards multiplied, but at the end of it a war against an unknown planet had to be fought. At last Jupiter was seen through the long-range viewers. Ames gave Henlow the news and he rushed to the observation port.

"What do you make of her, Chief?" asked Ames. His hands were visibly trembling.

Henlow crouched before the telescopic device and fingered the controls. He remained silent, his eye fixed to the viewer for several seconds. Jupiter looked formidable—a huge planet piebald in a pattern of light and dark, with a great red spot predominating it. The planet's satellites were arrayed on each side of her, one side in darkness, the other illuminated by the sun. The terminator slash cut across the planet like a poisoned flesh wound, red and inflamed.

An uncontrollable shudder zig-zagged through Henlow's body, his brow was creased and worried. Throughout the long trip there had been no sign of interception. Wave after wave of space-ships had been allowed to proceed exactly as had been planned in the Lunar briefing room. It wasn't natural. Far from being pleased, he was inwardly perturbed; a nagging sense of foreboding taunted him with thoughts of a catastrophic defence measure, against which he would have no adequate weapon.

He straightened up and met Ames's querying gaze. "She looks very much as I expected," he said noncommittally.

Ames didn't have to be told the Chief was worried. He had seen the strained and wrinkled look before.

Henlow went to Sparta at the radio. "Get me Adlai," he snapped.

Sparta dipped the necessary switches and began calling, "Henlow control calling Vilos leader."

Adlai came in after a few seconds. "What do you think of her, Chief? Looks big and nasty to me."

"Have you seen any trace of fire from the planet?"

"Nothing, and I should hope not at this range. If they've

got anything to touch us where we are, we might as well pack in."

Henlow grunted, realising that he was being over anxious. "No sign of any enemy ships?"

"Not a thing. Awaiting orders, Chief. Over."

What did one do against an enemy that wouldn't fight, thought Henlow? But over five hundred space-crews were awaiting his orders. "Go down and try to draw their fire. Take half the pursuit wing with you, and a dozen torpedo carriers. We can't use the bombers until they give away their firing positions. Try and wake them up. Let them see that we mean business."

"Do the carriers drop their load?"

"Everything. They don't like the jixta. We know that."

"Where do they drop them?"

"Hold on, I'll get the dope from Astorola. Get your ships ready. I'll call you back. Roger."

Henlow called Astorola over the intercomm. She came to him at the viewer.

"Can you pick out Lamcurada?" he asked.

She bent over the instrument, whispering instructions.

Henlow jotted them down with swift, almost nervous flourishes of his stylo. Brad left his gun position and came over to reassure her.

Adlai came through again. "All set, Chief."

"Right, get this. Lamcurada is situated N.E. of the dark area north of the red spot. If you go down low enough you are bound to draw fire. There is a large space-port on the fringe of the forest surrounding the city. A heavy barrage should come up from there, but be careful of the forest, it's bristling with defences. I'll get the bombers to come over as soon as the defence positions are located, and I'm going to fire that forest if I possibly can. Any sign of enemy ships?"

Adlai laughed. "I reckon I put the wind up them last time."

"I wouldn't be too sure," warned Henlow. "Get going! Keep in touch! Good luck!"

Adlai acknowledged and got through to his ship commanders. The galaxies of stars saw odd little constellations of silver specks spin round and go off downwards in a blaze of vicious spitting flames. Adlai's hands rested on the banks of switches, content to remain on automatic, but ever ready to switch over to manual should any sudden correction be needed. "Bomb observers set above?" he asked. "Over."

"Bomber leader answering. Looking out on all ships. Will mark firing positions on charts as soon as they open up. If you ask me, they're all dead down there. Over."

"Only waiting for us to get into range." Adlai smiled grimly, realising that he was speaking like Henlow.

The velocimeter was crawling upwards now and they were less than 20,000 miles above Jupiter. "Split up," he ordered.

"Don't forget your uridanium circuits. And keep your eyes open, we're coming into heat beam range."

At 15,000 miles they flattened out. There was still no firing from the planet. Out of his starboard observation port Adlai saw his ships in circuit. "Vilos leader calling Henlow control. At 15,000. Nothing happening yet, Chief."

Henlow came in. "Be careful. It's a trap. They're waiting for you to get into range. Avoid any formation."

"Right, I'm sending the torpedo carriers over at 12,000. Will see what they do then."

Adlai watched the torpedo ships wheel into position as he gave them orders. He kept up amongst their straggling order. Still no sign of opposition. The ships went in towards the target area. "Drop your fish over the dark area and get out quick," said Adlai.

"Going in, Vilos leader. We'll drop them all right. All fish fully boosted for launching. They'll get a nasty . . ."

The radio set suddenly went dead. "What is it?" flashed Adlai to his radio operator.

Before he could be answered the ship lurched violently in the backwash of an explosion. Looking through an underside observation port Adlai saw a torpedo ship burst in a flash of flame. Then his own ship swayed. He flicked the side jet switches and went skidding away in a wide upward arc. Lights were now flashing from all over the planet, searching into the black abyss like hot knives in treacle.

"They've increased the heat beam range," he yelled into his microphone. "All Vilos ships make for cover. Get above 15,000 at least. Each commander acknowledge. Take them, Mac."

The radio operator cut in, his face shocked and hair dishevelled.

Adlai pulled away in a slow inspection curve. He seemed to be alone among the stars.

Henlow came in from the *Veno Aegis*. "They've got all the torpedo ships," he said calmly. "But they've given away their positions. Bombers are going in now. And I'm sending Cephos ships over the forest area with incendiary blasters . . ."

The voice was cut off by Mackay. "Look what's coming to starboard, Skipper!"

Adlai glanced out of the port and gasped. It was another enemy link formation, ten times larger than the last one, spitting out heat in all directions. "How many ships answered your call, Mac?"

"Only three."

"Hook them up to go after this thing. If we don't break it up it will blast every ship we've got clean out of space." Even as he spoke he saw a courageous commander put his ship into a suicide dive aimed at the centre of the formation. The little

Vilos ship was burned out long before it reached its objective.

Adlai flicked his switches to fling the ship into a wide-sweeping zig-zag course. He flashed through the gaps in the criss-crossing beams of heat, twisting and swooping like a silver gull caught up in a firework display. He called for Dorrell to take over the jixta gun and was about to go blazing it when he heard a shout come over the radio. "Vilos below, get out of the way, blast you! I've got a bead right on that formation."

Adlai needed no second bidding, with a quick glance at the generator dial and power pressure guage he sent the ship soaring upwards to escape the blistering heat all around him. The small ship was like the inside of an atomized furnace, and the cooling system lever was at the end of its quadrant.

In the next second the whole universe of space seemed to erupt spark and flame and explosive. Something struck the pursuit ship and the noise reverberated through it like the tolling of a death knell.

"Something hit us, Skipper."

"That was only Kaunchadi patting us on the back," said the engineer, taking on the humorous line of Stevens. "Everything's all right, Skipper. It doesn't seem to have done us any harm."

Adlai also hurriedly surveyed his instruments. "That's more than that formation can say," he shouted. "Sit tight, lads. We're going in to do a spot of mopping up this time. Those ships are flopping about like a lot of met balloons."

In the control ship Henlow was watching anxiously, itching to be in the action himself. The jixta bombs were now dropping on the planet and hits being recorded. As the bombers made their high-level runs precision instruments guided their missiles to their objectives. Heat beams were being snuffed out as easily as candles.

"Henlow control to Cephos leader."

"Cephos leader answering. Over."

"The bombers are doing well. Are all your ships fitted up with incendiaries?"

"Yes. Chief. We're all set to go."

"Right, take your ships in and fire that forest. Make a proper job of it. I want the flames to come in towards the city from all directions."

"We'll do what we can, Chief."

"You'll have to go down low, so keep a sharp lookout for interception ships."

"A very sharp lookout," Jagers, the Cephos leader, emphasized.

Jagers called up his ships and swooped down leading a straggling formation. Henlow kept him on the radio all the time. He heard him shout out in sudden alarm.

"What is it, Jagers?"

"Another beam shot up. It's taken three of my ships."

Henlow got on to Bomber leader. The beam was extinguished. "All right now, Jaggers?"

There was no answer.

"Henlow control calling Cephos leader. Jaggers, come in. Listening out. Over."

The line was dead.

"Henlow control calling all Cephos ships. Answer back all of you. Over."

Not a murmur came back.

Henlow rubbed his hand across his brow. Success had been wrenched from him just when he thought he was about to strike a blow which would give him negotiating power."

Adlai came on. "We finished the formation off, Chief. All that didn't get away, that is. The others just disappeared. It was as if some giant hand reached up from the forest and clutched them down."

"What did you say?"

"It was just as if something clutched them down. The whole lot of them disappeared into the forest."

"Right, keep patrol, and don't go down low. Warn all ships. Roger."

Henlow summoned Astorola hurriedly. "Something has gone wrong," he said. His face was ashen and quivering. "They've got some other weapon. They're clawing our ships out of space when they go down low."

Astorola looked puzzled. Her eyes were jet black. Suddenly she cried out. "Of course, I've got it! Short-range dakar. The uridanium circuit is not strong enough to combat it at short-range."

Sparta whistled expressively.

Henlow shot him an angered glance. "I've got to set fire to those forests before I can hope to bring Kaunchadi to terms."

Brad had been listening intently. "Well, why not drop incendiary bombs from the long-range bombers?" he said.

Henlow was so amazed that he gaped at him open-mouthed. Then a slow smile suffused his features. "Of course, that's the obvious answer," he said. "Sparta send all the precision bombers back to the rearmament ships to load up with incendiaries. Tell them to drop them on every inch of that damned forest and not to stop until they've produced a raging inferno."

Sparta got busy at once.

"Now, Astorola, I need your co-operation for the most important part of this operation," said Henlow, in low, earnest tones. "It is something which only you can do. If this fire bombing is successful I want you to get in radio contact with Kaunchadi. Tell him that we will devastate every city on the planet if he does not submit to unconditional surrender."

"But if the fire surrounds him on all sides he will be burned

out, anyway," she pointed out. "He has nothing to lose by fighting on."

"He can save his cities if he so desires. I have a chemical spraying fire-fighting squadron with the task force. They could put the fires out, and if Kaunchadi agrees to our terms no further harm will be done."

Astorola was silent as Sparta rapped out the Chief's instructions to the necessary ships. "You'll have to make a success of this fire attack," she said. "They'll never submit while one escape route remains open."

"I'm prepared for that," said Henlow. "I shall direct the bombers myself. The fact that Lamcurada is surrounded by forest is very much to our advantage, unless there is some underground route out of the city?"

"There wasn't up to my leaving it."

"Then we should have every chance of success. It might also stop a lot of unnecessary suffering."

There was a trace of tears in Astorola's dark eyes. "I am not going back on my pledge, Professor Henlow," she whispered. "But I would like to avoid unnecessary suffering."

He smiled sympathetically. "I quite understand," he murmured. He patted her bent shoulders, then went to the radio controls.

Within the space of the next three hours the precision bombers fulfilled their task, reducing the Jupitan forest to a flame-wrapped mass of chemical fire. The ships went over the target area one after the other, releasing their bombs as directed by Henlow to fit a line overlap pattern. Through the telescopic viewers the planet looked like a seething cauldron of flame and vapour. Henlow grunted with satisfaction. He beckoned Astorola to look through the eyepiece of the long-range instruments.

"Do you think that will frighten them?" he asked.

She nodded silently, shuddering a little as she said, "I should think so."

"Right, you can call them and tell them that I have a large force of ships ready to come in and bomb them out of existence if they don't agree to my terms. Sparta, try and contact the planet on the radio."

The radio operator acknowledged with a jaunty flick of his hand. The space battle seemed all over bar the shouting. The challenge from Jupiter had been accepted and won.

Kaunchadi's wrangling was mere token opposition. After a further unleashing of bombs he had no option but to submit. There was a distinct dewiness about Astorola's eyes as she gave Henlow the news.

A grim smile illumined Henlow's face, the furrows smoothed out and he stood up, stretching the fatigue from his limbs. He flashed an inter-comm message to the I.V.B. troops. "Prepare for landing. Put your space-suits on and carry full armament."

A whoop came from the men who were bored with long inactivity. Slowly, and with a carefully thought out plan prepared, Henlow had the flames extinguished and guided the troop-carrying ships down. At last the *Veno Aegis* went down to make a perfect stall and fire landing. The Jupitans were being rounded up. They looked cowed and submissive before the weight of armour brought out from the carriers. Any sign of opposition was relentlessly crushed. Henlow knew that until he established law and order protective measures had to be drastic. After a quick survey of the space-port he brought the rest of the ships down and set the radio men working on the transmission difficulties.

"It's going to be a long job," he told the crew of the *Veno Aegis* as she was being prepared for launching. "But thanks to your magnificent co-operation, Astorola, we are bound to succeed. You have more than fulfilled your task and honoured your pledge. That I know was not easy. You return to Earth, however, with my blessing. You can be sure that no charges will be made against you or your husband, even your marriage will be sanctioned."

For a brief moment Astorola gazed round the scorched landscape of her home planet. Tears welled up in her eyes.

"It wouldn't be safe for you to stay here," said Henlow. "Your presence would be a constant ulcer of unrest."

"She doesn't want to stay," put in Brad. "But she's bound to feel——"

"Quite so," interrupted Henlow, ushering them towards the airlock.

Astorola continued to gaze out of the observation port until they had settled on their couches for launching. The scream of subsonic noise subsided, and with Fairbairn in command, the ship coasted easily.

Brad looked across at his wife and smiled. "We're on our way back to Earth, never to leave it again," he said.


She looked at him wistfully, hovering on the abyss of tears. "No regrets?" he queried.

She perked up and smiled. "No regrets," she confirmed.

Sparta was busy relaying Henlow's catalogue of instructions to Earth. By the time the *Veno Aegis* landed, London was agog with the news of Professor Henlow's latest exploits. All over the city brilliantly-lit news tabloids were announcing that another planet had been conquered.

THE END.

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